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SHE TORE THE MASK FROM HIS FACE, AND MAULED AND SCRATCHED HIM SO THAT HE WAS
FORCED TO CALL FOR HELP.

Dwarf Jake, the Detective;

OR,

KIT KENYON'S MAN-HUNT.

BY EDWARD WILLETT,

AUTHOR OF "THE BOY CHAMPION," "FEATHER-WEIGHT, THE BOY SPY," ETC. ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A DESERTED CAMP.

A HORSEMAN was riding alone down a mountain pass over a road that led to a fair valley set deep among the hills.

He was a middle-aged man with a shaven face, and brown hair slightly grizzled. In stature he was short and dwarfish, and between his shoulders was a slight hump that hardly amounted to a deformity. But his broad back and spreading loins and long arms spoke of physical strength, and on his face determination and energy were plainly written.

His attire was neat, though stout and serviceable, and under his coat he wore a cartridge-belt and two revolvers, and a short repeating-rifle was carried over his saddle-bow. His capacious saddle-bags were fairly filled with either wardrobe or with provisions, probably with both. The horse that he rode was a strong and sure-footed animal, accustomed to all sorts of travel and all conditions of weather.

As the rider descended the mountain pass he caught occasional glimpses of the valley below, and at the same time he could not fail to notice that the road he was following gave little evidence of having been recently traveled.

"This is queer," he muttered. "I wonder what is the matter with Cacheton."

Cacheton was still there. There could be no question of that. It was still down there in the valley; not far below and beyond him. The occasional glimpses he caught of that flourishing mining-camp showed him—not its spires and steeples, as there had never been anything of the sort—but the roofs of its houses and shanties and cabins.

Yet the road that led to Cacheton showed scarcely any sign of travel, and that was what made the rider wonder what was the matter with the camp.

Lately snow had fallen—one of the last snow flurries of the early spring—and it had melted, leaving the ground wet and muddy, so that tracks could easily be distinguished; but there were very few on the Cacheton road.

The curiosity of the rider was excited, and he urged his horse to a more rapid walk down the incline until he reached the valley, and the camp lay before him.

It was then noon, high noon, and the sun was shining brightly in an unclouded sky; but there was no semblance of life visible in Cacheton.

The houses and shanties and cabins slumbered in the sunlight; but where were those who had built and occupied them?

Surely not in the camp, or anywhere about it;

for there was nothing to indicate the presence of one human being.

The rider pushed forward and entered the straggling street, along which lay the main portion of Cacheton; but not a human being did he see. The houses were all there, and some of them were closed, and some of them were open; but all were deserted. A few of the signs of the saloons remained, and here and there barrels and bottles could be seen within; but no living person, white or red, was anywhere in sight.

What was the matter? What had become of the inhabitants? Had they all gone off on a picnic, or had some fatal epidemic suddenly struck the camp, killing half the population and scaring away the others?

Nothing of the kind. Although the rider had no personal experience of the West, he could easily guess what was the matter.

Tidings had arrived of new and rich diggings further on, and the camp had been suddenly deserted for a location that promised quicker and bigger fortunes.

This was exactly the state of the case. The Cacheton "pocket" had been gradually but pretty rapidly "petering out," until there was no longer any attraction to hold the people there, when the news came of splendid discoveries at Homestretch Gulch. The reports were so brilliant and so well authenticated that there was no resisting their allurements, and everybody was so possessed by a wild desire to reach the land of promise, that in a very short time there was nothing left of Cacheton but the mostly empty tenements.

"I had hoped to find a few decent meals here and a fair bed," muttered the rider. "I can easily find shelter, though, if not a bed, and there is no fear that I will starve."

As he was passing a decent-looking white-washed tenement, his attention was arrested by a drumming on a window-pane.

He looked in that direction, and the noise was increased, and he thought he saw through the window a man's face; but he could not be sure, as the sunshine was strong against the glass.

"There is somebody or something here," he said, "and I shall be glad to see it, if it is nothing more than a dog that has been left shut up in a house."

He dismounted in front of the white tenement, hitched his horse, and tried the door.

It easily yielded, and he entered.

The sight that met his gaze made him stop at the threshold and stare, and no wonder.

A woman lay there on the floor almost at his feet—a woman who had been beautiful in life, and was lovely in death.

For she was dead, quite dead, and had been dead at least twelve hours.

As the stranger stood and stared at her he heard his name called faintly.

"Jake! Jake Nemo!"

He turned, and saw a bed against the wall next to the window at which he had heard the drumming. On the bed was stretched a young man whose haggard features and hectic cheeks and wild eyes told of the ravages of a devouring fever.

Changed as he was, Jake Nemo recognized the man, and stepped quickly to his bedside.

"Kit Kenyon!" he exclaimed. "Is it really you? For God's sake tell me what this means."

"Did you see her?" feebly responded the man on the bed, in a voice that scarcely rose above a whisper. "Did you see my wife there?"

"Yes, I saw her."

"Is she dead?"

"Yes, Kit—quite dead."

Tears stood in Kit Kenyon's dark eyes, and his lips closed tightly, and a cloud gathered on his dark face.

"What does it mean, Kit?" earnestly inquired the dwarf. "How do you happen to be here in this fix, and why do I find her dead?"

Kenyon touched his hands to his lips, that were dry with fever.

"I am so weak that I can hardly speak," he answered. "There ought to be a little whisky somewhere about here."

Jake Nemo had a flask, and he produced it and put it to his friend's mouth. With difficulty Kenyon swallowed some of the strong liquor, and it revived his strength and partially restored his speech.

"Lift me up, Jake," he said, "and I will tell it as well as I can."

The dwarf propped him up in the bed, and sat at his side to listen.

"I had gone to the other side of the range, Jake—beyond the Notch, you know—to get pay for a drove of cattle that I had sold, and she went with me. As we were coming back a fever struck me, and we turned aside to Cacheton. I knew that I could rest here, though the camp was played out. We got into this house, and she took care of me. It must be three days or more that we have been here."

"I grew worse, and last night was clean off my head—far off. It was hard lines for her, no doubt, all alone with me here. In the night somebody came in. It seems to me that there were two men; but I am not really sure of anything about it. I suppose they came to rob me of my money. She must have resisted them, and I am sure that I heard a shot."

"Then all was dark with me until morning, when I saw her lying there, and I began to piece things together, and I believed that she was dead, though I was too weak to get up and see. Now I know it."

"This is terribly hard on you, Kit," said Jake Nemo, as he pressed the nerveless hand of his friend.

"Nothing was ever harder, and nothing ever can be. There is only one thing left—to hunt down the fiends that murdered my wife. But I must get well first, and I have nothing to trace them by. I have not the faintest recollection of them, I was so wild with fever."

"There must be a clew, Kit. Leave me to find it."

"You must bury her, Jake—carefully—and I will take up the body when I can."

"I will; but I must try to get you up from here. It is luck that I have some medicines."

"What medicines, Jake?"

"Only quinine and calomel; but I know how to use them, and will begin at once."

The dwarf put the dead woman under the

ground carefully and reverently, wrapping her in the bed-clothing of the deserted house.

Then he made a thorough examination, within the building and outside of it, and returned to report to his sick friend.

"There were two of them, Kit," he said. "As they carried off your horses, there is something of a clew. What were the horses like?"

"Hers was a bright bay with a white star on the forehead."

"There are many such."

"And one white forefoot."

"That is a little better. And yours?"

"Mine was a heavy black horse. I will know him if ever I see him, and he will know my voice."

"Of course they will get rid of the horses; but I will remember those points. How much money did you have?"

"About three thousand dollars."

"Where was it?"

"In my saddle-bags. She took care of them."

The dwarf found the saddle-bags; but there was no money in them.

"They got the money," he said. "Was there anything you could trace it by?"

"Nothing at all. It was in gold and notes—quite a pile in gold."

"Well, they have left some signs about here. One of them was a short man, and he wore a buckskin coat—not a hunting-shirt—with brass buttons. The other was a tall man, and he rode a sorrel horse with a nearly white mane."

"How do you know all that, Jake?"

"I know that one of them was short, because he had to rise on his feet to mount his horse, and where he mounted I found a button of his coat with a bit of the buckskin attached to it. I know that the other was a tall man, because he had knelt down there in the mud, to examine his horse's foot, perhaps, and the distance from foot to knee-cap gave me a good idea of his height. The horse had rubbed against the tree it was hitched to, and had left a few hairs of its mane."

"Those are good points. Oh, Jake, if they had taken me and the money, they might be forgiven; but there will be no mercy for them if I ever find them."

"I wonder why they didn't kill you?"

"I don't know. Perhaps they failed to see me. Perhaps they thought I was far enough gone without killing. Perhaps they were frightened at what they had done, and wanted to hurry away. I only know that I must find them."

"You shall find them, Kit. I will serve as detective. Their tracks are plain and the mud is drying. I will make a record of the shape of their feet, and with the points we have I am keen to bet that we shall find them."

"Which way did they go?"

"Westward; but you mustn't worry about them now. You will not be able to get out for several days. As soon as you are well enough we will start."

CHAPTER II.

A FLOODED GULCH.

At the bottom of a deep and narrow valley between two lofty mountains—which might perhaps better be styled a ravine than a valley

—a clear and sparkling stream ran toward the east.

Though already a little swollen by the early melting of the snow, it was then a quiet and well-behaved stream as it rippled and bubbled on its course, spreading here and there into dark and placid pools which might be supposed to conceal the beautiful spotted trout of the mountains.

That trout were there was made probable by the presence of a young man who was fishing at the north side of the stream.

He was quite a young man, with a new mustache, and his face had not yet taken on the bronzed hue that speaks of long acquaintance with wind and weather.

His newness to that region was further evidenced by his attire, as he wore a derby hat and a cutaway coat, though he had condescended to brown corduroys that were stuffed into high boots.

Quite incongruous, though the chilly weather demanded something of the sort, was a short and rather dirty coat of deerskin with brass buttons down the front, that he wore over his cutaway. It did not appear to belong to him, and surely did not improve his appearance.

This young man was fishing, but in an idle and listless way, as if that was not the business which had brought him to the stream. Though he had been there more than an hour, he had caught but one trout, and did not seem to care about catching any more.

Instead of watching the water and attending to his line, his glances were continually straying to the other side of the stream and up the mountain, and his face wore a look of eager anticipation, as if he were expecting somebody.

That was clearly the employment that his heart was in, rather than the occupation of catching fish.

It was not for nothing that he waited there, and what he shortly saw was well worth looking for.

Down the mountain-side came a bright and fresh-faced girl, not yet out of her teens, plainly but neatly dressed in brown muslin with a cloth sacque, and with a trim little hat which the wind could not blow away. In her right hand she carried a stout staff, though her light and springy step did not seem to need its aid, and around her waist was a belt with a sheath holding a silver-mounted revolver with a rifled barrel.

As she came down to the stream she did not notice the young man who was fishing on the other side, unless she gave him a quick glance from under her eyelashes.

He, however, at once dropped his fishing-rod and hastened toward her, smiling and raising his hat as he bid her good-morning.

"You here?" she exclaimed, with a pretty air of surprise. "I am quite glad to meet you. It is so pleasant to see somebody in this solitude. How did you happen to come here?"

"I happened to come down to try to catch a few fish," he replied, as if that had really been his business there.

"What luck have you had?"

"Very poor luck. I have only one trout, and that is a small one."

"Why, there are plenty of fish in the stream. Whenever my father comes down he brings home a fine mess of trout."

"Your father, no doubt, is a much better fisherman than I am."

"And now it is noon and you have but one fish."

"Is it noon? Time slips by so swiftly that I had not thought it was so late."

In making this assertion the young man did not adhere strictly to the truth, as the fact was that time had passed very slowly with him until the person to whom he was speaking appeared.

"I was very glad to see you coming," he went on to say. "You surely live near here, and we must be neighbors; but, though this is the second time I have met you, I do not even know your name."

"My name is Clara Wynne," she frankly answered, "and my father is Adam Wynne. Most everybody about here knows of him, though I suppose there are few people who know much about him. We live up yonder on the mountain-side, and you can see our house from here if it wasn't for a point of rock that hides it."

"My name is Harry Poindexter," said the young man. "My brother, Arthur, and I came out here last fall to start a sheep farm. We came at a bad time of the year and were snowed in a good bit of the winter, and had a hard pull to get through, but I think we will do nicely now. We live about five miles from here, in the valley beyond the gap, and I am so glad that we are neighbors to you. Arthur and I would be pleased to visit your father and to have him visit us."

"I am afraid that it can't be managed," replied the girl. "My father never goes anywhere, and he objects to visitors. He would be likely to give you a hard time if you should come there."

"A sort of hermit is he?"

"Something that way."

"It must be very lonesome for you?"

"Sometimes I feel lonesome. Hark! what is that?"

That was a sudden sound like distant thunder, increasing and coming nearer with fearful rapidity until the roar was tremendous.

"What can it be?" replied Harry Poindexter, looking about in wonder.

The stream between them was swelling and beginning to foam and brawl where it had bubbled so peacefully.

"It is a flood!" exclaimed the girl, pointing at the water. "There has been a heavy rain to the west of us, and the snow has melted down from the hills, and the water has broken through the ice-dam above here, and it will fill this gulch quicker than you can say Jack Robinson. We must run up the mountain."

Hardly had she finished speaking when the truth of her words was fearfully apparent.

Down the ravine rushed the flood—not a river, nor yet a torrent, but a huge wall of water, towering high, bearing before it masses of ice and trees and great boulders, and filling the valley with its thunderous roar.

It did not seem to flow, or even to run, but to

fly forward as if it had been shot out of some gigantic cannon.

The spectacle was terrible, and the peril was imminent.

Harry Poindexter could not help appreciating the danger and perceiving that flight was possible in only one direction.

He sprung at once across the stream to the assistance of Clara Wynne.

She did not need his help.

She had only waited to see him take the right start and then she led the way up the mountain-side so swiftly that he had as much as he could do to overtake her.

Rapidly as they fled, the flood was yet more rapid, and in a period of time that could be counted only by seconds, it was roaring below them and howling after them.

As the torrent rose and swelled they increased their exertions to climb the steep ascent.

Suddenly a stop was put to their progress.

The girl in her hurry had diverged slightly from the right track at the start, and had been blindly followed by Harry Poindexter. The divergence had increased as they ascended, until they were "brought up all standing" by a wall of rock that was higher than their heads.

She looked about in bewilderment, and her surprise changed to terror as she saw the torrent still howling up the steep.

The path was at the edge of the ledge, more than thirty yards away, and it would be impossible to reach it before the water should come up and sweep them off.

The rock face was quite perpendicular and nearly smooth, offering no foothold and scarcely a clutch for the fingers. Above their heads was stretched forth the trunk of a fallen tree; but it was quite out of reach, and young Poindexter tried in vain to seize it.

He looked at the girl, and her answering gaze was full of despair. The torrent was not roaring then as it had roared at the first rush, but was rapidly rising and climbing the mountain-side, and had already reached above their knees.

The look that each cast upon the other said that there was no hope; but help came when they had abandoned hope.

A voice above caused them to look up quickly, and they saw a dwarfish but long-armed man sitting astride the trunk of the fallen tree.

"Give me both of your hands," he said, as he reached down his long arms.

The girl instinctively raised her hands, which were seized in a strong grasp, and the dwarf lifted her out of the reach of the torrent and placed her on the tree, whence she was taken by another man, who transferred her to firm ground.

Only a brief space of time was consumed by this exploit; but every second increased the peril of Harry Poindexter.

The water had already reached his waist, and was rapidly rising, bearing on its swollen surface trees and logs that rushed by as if in a mill-race, threatening to tear him from the face of the rock to which he was vainly striving to cling.

But the dwarf wrapped his legs about the tree-trunk, and reached down, seizing him by

the collar just as he was about to be swept away.

There he held him until his comrade came to his help, and by their united exertions they raised the young man to the top of the rock, and placed him on the plateau at the side of the girl.

CHAPTER III.

"IT IS THE COAT."

THE two young people were safe; but the torrent in the ravine swelled and boiled upward until it nearly reached the plateau on which they stood.

"We must go up higher, Jake," said one of the men who had saved them.

"I don't think we need to, Kit," replied Dwarf Jake. "See! the water now has a large space to cover over yonder, and I think we have had the worst of it."

Kit Kenyon was looking closely at Harry Poindexter, but more particularly at the coat he wore. He started toward the young man, but was restrained by a sign from his companion.

"You have saved my life," said the girl, as she looked with a shudder at the roaring flood.

"I am very thankful to you, and my father—"

"I know well enough what your father would say," interrupted the dwarf. "You are Adam Wynne's daughter, I take it. You were only a child when I saw you last; but I remember your face. Your name is Clara, I believe."

"Yes, sir, and I think I remember you. Oh, yes, you are Mr. Nemo, and you were at our house in — before we came out here."

"You have hit it. I have not seen you since that time; but I have seen your father, and I am going to visit him now. Who is this young man?"

"It is Harry Poindexter. He and his brother have a sheep farm about five miles from here, across the valley. He was fishing in the stream when the flood came."

"Well, young sir, you will have to go with us, I suppose."

"Perhaps Mr. Wynne may object to a stranger," suggested Poindexter.

"That is no matter. You have nowhere else to go. You can't think of crossing the valley until the flood subsides. You may lead the way with the young lady, and my friend and I will follow."

A half-hour's walk brought them to Adam Wynne's house, a stout and comfortable but rudely-built cabin, situated on a plateau up the mountain-side.

The house was set so that it was shielded from the heaviest winds and storms, and the plateau had been turned into a garden, where kitchen vegetables and flowering plants, carefully tended, grew in luxuriance.

Adam Wynne was standing out there, shading his eyes from the sun with his hand, and gazing down into the valley, though from his position nothing unusual could be seen.

He was a man past middle age, tall and stately, with grizzled hair and beard, and with a military air which was also expressed in his clothes, though they were common garments of stout woolen. There was something in the

way he wore them, as well as in his general appearance, that spoke of military training and habits.

His face lighted up when he saw his daughter; but he frowned heavily as his gaze rested on her companion.

The dwarf pressed forward, and offered his hand to the old man, who greeted him warmly.

"Is it really you, Jake Nemo? I am very glad to see you. But who are these with you? I don't understand it."

"You soon will," replied the dwarf. "Do you know what has happened down in the valley?"

"I heard a sort of roaring noise, and was wondering what it could be. Is it a flood?"

"A sudden flood, and a big one."

"Why, that is very dangerous, and my daughter was down that way. Clara, you must never again go out alone. To think that you might have been caught by that flood!"

"She was caught in it, Mr. Wynne. My friend and I came upon her and this young man as they were climbing out of its way. They had got to where they could go no further, and would have been swept away if we had not happened to be there in the nick of time to pick them up and put them out of harm's reach."

"Merciful Heaven! And you and your friend saved my child's life. I am more than grateful to you both. I owe you a debt that I can never pay."

"Nothing of the kind. Don't make so much of what was only a bit of good luck."

Nemo introduced Kit Kenyon and Harry Poindexter to the old man, who spoke to them politely, but was not at all gracious to Poindexter, whom he evidently regarded as an unpleasant necessity rather than a welcome guest.

He invited them all into the cabin, which proved to be a roomy and pleasant abode, well supplied with books and articles of comfort, and a stalwart negro woman was set at work to prepare dinner for them.

"Have you any news for me, Nemo?" he asked, when they were seated inside.

The dwarf sadly shook his head.

"You have not found him, then?"

"I have not even found his trail. I don't know what has become of him. I am afraid he has left the country."

"We must give it up, then, I suppose."

"No, indeed. Never give anything up! It is a weary while to wait; but patient search must bring some result."

"It is very strange, friend Nemo. I thought that nobody ever baffled you."

"Nobody ever has, except this man, who has baffled me so far. I can only ask you to have patience."

"I will try to be patient," replied the old man; "but, as you say, it is a weary while to wait. I had hoped that you might bring me some news."

This conversation was quite unintelligible to the others, and Kit Kenyon, who had been closely eying young Poindexter, nudged the dwarf, and whispered to him:

"I am crazy to get at that chap. Shall I tackle him now, Jake?"

"No. Not yet."

"But it is the coat."

"I have no doubt of that. It must be the coat. But there is something queer about this. Wait till after dinner. He can't get away."

The negro woman soon served a plentiful and excellent dinner, to which all did ample justice, with the exception of young Poindexter, who was obviously embarrassed.

After dinner pipes and tobacco were produced, and a social smoke was in order.

"Where were you on the 23d of May, Mr. Poindexter?" suddenly asked the dwarf.

"Where was I on the 23d of May?" repeated the astonished young man.

"Yes, sir—the day and night of the 23d."

"It is a strange question; but I suppose you have an object in asking it."

"Of course I have. I am not asking it out of idle curiosity."

"Let me think. I suppose I must have been at home then, as I have not been away but once in a month, when I went to Homestretch for supplies. When was that? Why, that was the 23d of May. Yes, I was in Homestretch the afternoon and night of the 23d."

"Are you sure that you were not in Cacheton?"

"Cacheton? I know nothing about Cacheton. I was never there. That is what is called a played-out camp."

"Where did you get that coat?"

Kit Kenyon was eying the young man closely, with a look of ravenous eagerness, but said nothing. Clara Wynne looked from one to the other of the speakers with an air of astonishment, as if wondering what it was all about. Her father fastened a suspicious gaze upon Poindexter, and shook his head as if he thought there was good reason for his disapproval of the young man.

"Where did I get this coat?" repeated Harry. "That is another strange question; but it is queer how I got the coat. I suppose of course you mean this deerskin thing. I never saw it until this morning, when I found it."

"Found it?" exclaimed Kenyon.

"Yes, sir. You would never expect to find a coat in these mountains, or anything of the kind; but I found this. As I was coming down to the valley this morning, I saw it lying in a little gully, as if it had been thrown there. Curiosity led me to go down and get it. As the air was chilly, and it was not a bad coat, though rather dirty, I put it on."

"Was it near a road?" inquired Nemo.

"Not a road, but a path—what is called a trail. Now, sir, as I have answered your strange questions politely and to the best of my ability, I must request you to tell me why you asked them. They surely have a meaning, and it looks to me as if I am under some sort of suspicion."

"Well, young sir, I am not going to accuse you of being a murderer; but it is a fact that the man who wore that coat on the 23d of May committed a murder or helped to commit a murder."

Harry Poindexter cast a glance of horror at the coat, as if fearing that it might bear the stain of blood.

Clara Wynne looked at him, and her eyes were full of wonder and pity.

The old man again shook his head solemnly, convinced that his unwelcome guest was a bad and dangerous person.

"Are you sure it is the same coat, Jake?" demanded Kenyon.

"I have no doubt of it. You see that there is a button missing. Permit me, Mr. Poindexter."

The dwarf took from an inner pocket of his coat the button with a bit of buckskin attached which he had picked up at the scene of the tragedy in Cacheton, and fitted it to the place in the coat where a button was missing.

There could be no doubt that it belonged there.

"It is the coat," he said.

"What a strange fatality!" exclaimed young Poindexter. "I was away from home when the murder was committed, and now I am wearing the coat of the murderer!"

CHAPTER IV.

AN UNEXPECTED FIND.

A HUSH fell upon the party in Adam Wynne's cabin.

Harry Poindexter had put the case against himself in such a clear light, and at the same time in such a true light, that even Clara could not deny that the evidence as far as it went, pointed directly toward him.

"What was the murder you speak of?" asked Mr. Wynne, at last.

"On the night of the 23d," replied the dwarf, "two scoundrels murdered, in Cacheton, one of the loveliest, and brightest and best women I ever met. I will tell you the sad story, if my friend will permit me to."

There was no objection, and Jake proceeded to give such an account of the tragedy as his own observation and the few facts supplied by his friend enabled him to put together.

Kit Kenyon sat silent, with his brows drawn down and his lips compressed, but keenly eying Poindexter, who listened with evident horror of the crime and pity for the man who had been so sorely bereaved.

The tears came in Clara Wynne's eyes, and her father's face was dark and stern.

"I don't wonder that you suspect me," said Poindexter. "It is almost enough to make me suspect myself. I was away from home that night, and I am wearing the murderer's coat. Fortunately for myself I can easily prove that I passed the night at Homestretch."

"I don't think that will be necessary," replied the dwarf. "I am not suspecting you, and I don't suppose that my friend does, in spite of appearances; but everything ought to be made clear. If you have no objection we will go with you when you go home, and I wish you would wear that buckskin coat and say nothing about it. Then, when you meet your brother, we will be able to judge for ourselves."

"That will suit me, Mr. Nemo, though I will hate to wear this horrible coat. It will attract Arthur's attention at once, and he will be sure to speak about it."

"By the way, young sir, did you search that

coat when you found it—examine the pockets, or anything of the kind?"

"I never thought of that."

"It would do no harm to look through it. There might be evidence of some sort about it. Shall I attend to that matter?"

"I wish you would, and I will be very glad to have the coat off my back, if not off my hands."

The dwarf took the coat and examined it carefully, turning every pocket inside out, while Kit Kenyon carefully watched the inspection.

There was no handkerchief found in it, nor a knife, nor a bit of tobacco, nor anything of the slightest value. The man who threw it away had first made a clearance of its contents.

The only find was a small piece of torn writing paper in a corner of an inner pocket.

It was a mere scrap, discolored and rumpled; but there was a little bit of writing upon it—the letters *annis*, preceded by a portion of another letter that seemed to have been an *r*—and from the *s* the pen had been brought back under the rest of the writing, so as to make a tail or flourish.

Only this bit of paper, apparently of no earthly consequence; but Jake Nemo fastened on it at once, and gazed at it eagerly, with such a wolfish expression on his face as made the others stare at him.

"What is it, Jake?" demanded Kit Kenyon. "Have you really found anything there?"

"Is it possible," muttered the dwarf, "that I am at last going to light on something that I had never looked for, and could never have expected to find?"

"What is it, Jake?"

"You don't understand this, Kit. It has nothing to do with your affair. Mr. Wynne, do you remember his handwriting—Dick Grannis's handwriting?"

"Remember it!" exclaimed the old man. "Could I ever forget it?"

"Look at this scrap of paper, then, and tell me what you think of it."

Mr. Wynne took the paper, and was even more excited over it than the dwarf had been. His face was flushed, his teeth were clinched, and the frown on his brow grew deeper and darker.

"It is that scoundrel's signature," he said, "or a part of it. I am as sure of it as I could be of my own. And you found it in that coat?"

"Yes, and I want to say right here that I don't doubt this young man's story about finding the coat. If I had any doubt, I have none now. Do you happen to know anybody named Grannis, Mr. Poindexter?"

"I don't remember that I ever heard the name before to-day."

"So I supposed. Now, Kit, it is clear to me that the villains who killed your wife came this way, probably taking a short cut to Homestretch. The man who wore that buckskin coat must have got a notion in his head that they might be pursued, and it would tell on them. So he threw it away, after taking the precaution to clean out the pockets. But he missed this scrap of paper, which seems to have

come from the bottom of a torn letter, and which hints at a story, though it does not tell it. We will go home with Poindexter, Kit, and will pick up the trail where he found the coat."

Adam Wynne did not seem to be altogether pleased with the abandonment of the case against young Poindexter; but the scrap of paper interested him more closely.

"Will you find that scoundrel, then?" he asked.

"I don't know what we shall find," answered Nemo. "We can only do our best. I don't suppose that the man I am looking for on your account is the man who murdered Kit Kenyon's wife; but there must be some connection between them, and when we find one of them we may hope to find the other."

The torrent in the ravine did not fall as rapidly as it had risen; but it subsided very swiftly, and the next day the stream could be crossed.

Jake Nemo promised Mr. Wynne to send him, as soon as possible, any news he might get hold of, and set out with Kit Kenyon and Harry Poindexter.

The departure of Harry Poindexter was probably pleasing to the old man, who did not invite him to call again; but Clara found a chance to favor him with a parting smile, which doubtless consoled him for her father's disapproval.

At Nemo's request he wore the buckskin coat, though he shuddered when he put it on, and declared that he would be rejoiced when he could rid himself of the incumbrance.

To reach the Poindexter Ranch they forded the stream, which had not yet fallen to its usual level, and took the path that Harry had properly styled a trail, leading through a gap in the mountains to a stretch of open country.

As they approached the spot where Harry had found the coat he pointed it out, and under the direction of Nemo they passed around it, to avoid disturbing any tracks or signs that might have been left there.

"What is the use, Jake?" inquired Kit Kenyon. "Considerable rain has fallen lately, and everything must have been washed away."

"Don't be too sure of that, Kit. Of course the rain makes a difference; but it will be queer if I don't find something. Who would have thought that we would have come across that coat or that scrap of paper? I begin to believe that luck is on our side."

The Poindexter Ranch was pleasantly situated on a wooded slope, commanding a fine view of an extensive reach of rolling country, part of it timbered, and all well watered, forming an admirable cattle-rage. A rude house had been erected, intended to be replaced by a better building when the ranch became prosperous, and the general appearance of things was new and incomplete.

As it was about dinner time when they reached the ranch, Arthur Poindexter was at home, and he was so overjoyed by the safe return of his brother that Harry did not at once have a chance to introduce his companions.

He appeared to be several years older than Harry, and was a tall and stalwart young man,

fresh and bright in his face, with hearty and cheerful manners, and a frank and genial disposition. It was at once evident that Harry was his pet and his pride.

"We were getting ready to go and look for you, my boy," said he. "There came a report here of a terrible flood in the valley, and I was afraid that something had happened to you."

"Something did happen to me," replied Harry. "I was caught by the flood, and it would have made an end of me if it hadn't been for my friends here, who fished me out and saved my life."

He then introduced his companions and told the story of his peril and rescue.

"So there was a woman in the case," remarked Arthur, "and that accounts for the scrape. I am deeply grateful to these gentlemen, and heartily glad to see them here. Strangers are always welcome, and those who have done you such a service are more than welcome. But what a queer coat you are wearing, Harry! Where did you get the style, my boy, and who is your tailor?"

"I found it," answered Harry, a little sheepishly.

"Found it? You ought to have better sense than to pick up a thing like that, which somebody has probably thrown away. It might be loaded with vermin or infected with some dangerous disease."

"That is enough," said Jake Nemo. "That settles the question, if there was any question."

"Enough? What do you mean? What question does it settle?"

"The fact is, Mr. Poindexter, that your brother has been suspecting himself of being a murderer, and all on account of that coat."

"Indeed! That is strange. But our dinner is ready. Sit down, my friends, and you can tell me all about it at your leisure."

At the meal all needful explanations were made and well received, and Nemo also found it necessary to tell the sad tale of the tragedy at the deserted camp of Cacheton, by which Arthur Poindexter was visibly affected.

"I could offer an *alibi* for Harry," he said, "if any further proof were necessary. He could not possibly have been in Cacheton that night, and have got home as early as he did the next morning. Besides, he brought back a load of supplies, which I know came from Homestretch."

"There has really been no suspicion against him," answered Kenyon—"nothing but some strange coincidences that may help to put us on the right track."

The dwarf announced his intention of going immediately with Kit Kenyon to the spot where the coat was found, to pick up the trail of the man who threw it away, and Harry Poindexter proposed to accompany them.

Arthur wanted to go in place of his brother, as he did not wish Harry to expose himself to any more dangers; but Harry begged to be allowed to go, and in this his new friends supported him.

"He may be of use, as it was he who found the coat," suggested the dwarf, "and we don't expect to have a fight or to get into any sort of difficulty. We only want to find the trail now, so that we can follow it hereafter."

CHAPTER V.

A STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE.

No difficulty was expected, as Dwarf Jake declared, but Harry Poindexter, who had "sued" the obnoxious coat, saw fit to provide himself with a rifle and a belt of cartridges, and sallied forth with his friends, followed by Arthur's best wishes for their success.

They went at once to the spot where the coat had been found, and Harry pointed it out with exactness.

Nemo requested his companions to stand back, and went to the edge of the gully, from which point he carefully examined the ground in three directions.

After a while he started off up the trail, at times on his hands and knees, and with his nose near the ground.

"Is he a hound?" demanded Harry Poindexter, who was watching the dwarf's proceedings with interest. "Is he following his nose? Can he really scent a trail?"

"He is using his eyes, and he knows how to use them," replied Kenyon. "A hound would scarcely find a scent there now, but Jake Nemo will strike a trail if there is the slightest sign left. He has found tracks, you may be sure, as I saw him take a paper from his pocket and compare it with something on the ground.

Just then the dwarf rose to his feet, after making a mark on the earth, and beckoned to them to come to him.

"I've got it," he said. "Two men passed here, and I don't doubt that they were the men we are looking for. One of them dismounted near the edge of the gully. Probably he couldn't get his horse up to it. So it must have been the tall man who wore the buckskin coat."

"How do you make that out?" asked Kenyon.

"I made maps of their feet at Cacheton, as you remember, and the track of the tall one fits the faint track that was left here."

"If there are any tracks here I can't begin to make them out," remarked Harry Poindexter.

"No? Then you have much to learn before you follow the business of trailing. Your eyes are good enough, I suppose, but you don't know how to use them. Here are the tracks of the horses, pointing up the path."

"Yes, I see those, but you spoke of a man's tracks."

"Here, then, are the tracks you left when you went down to the valley."

"I can see them, since you have shown them to me, but they are quite recent."

"Step down to the gully with me. Here the man stood when he threw the coat away. You will have to look close to see the tracks, as they are very faint. Here is where he stepped down from his horse, making a heavier and better-defined track, and that is the mark I knew him by."

Harry, after examining the ground closely and carefully, declared that he would never have suspected the existence of the tracks if they had not been pointed out to him.

"That shows you, then, the sort of education you need. It is not enough to have eyes; you must learn how to use them. Now we will take up the trail and follow it while the day-

light holds out, and you two must let me go in advance."

The dwarf started up the path, and got over the ground pretty rapidly, as the traces of the horses' feet were generally plain enough. Occasionally he was obliged to stop and study the trail, and he came to a halt where it abruptly turned off toward the left into a rough and wooded region.

"They didn't go far from here," he said. "Their destination must have been somewhere in this neighborhood."

"Now you've got me again," remarked Harry Poindexter.

"Just put yourself in their place for a moment, my young friend."

"I put myself in the coat of one of them, and that's as far as I want to go."

"Pretty good for you. You are bright enough in the way of talk, but you need to learn to think. Would you start off into the woods in that direction without knowing just where you wanted to go to? Would you leave this easy trail and break off among those hills and gullies, unless it was a short cut to some place that you expected to reach pretty soon?"

"I don't believe I would," replied Harry.

"No more would they. It follows that they were well acquainted in this region, and that they were taking a short cut to some place that is not far from here—it may be a road, or it may be their real destination. If they know the country so well, we must suppose that they have an abiding-place somewhere in this latitude. Anyhow, we will follow them on the short cut."

The dwarf took up the trail again, and found it to be not a difficult one to follow, as the horses' feet had left plain tracks where the ground was soft.

But after passing a ravine, down and up the sides of which the horses had evidently scrambled, he came out upon a rocky plateau where there was neither tree nor bush nor soil, and where there was not the slightest trace of the trail.

He examined the stony surface carefully; but even where he knew the horses must have gone upon the plateau, he found not the slightest sign.

He scratched his head, and admitted that he was puzzled.

"If the trail had been made within twenty-four hours," he said, "I think I could follow it over there; but it is too old, and I am stumped."

"We may pick it up in the timber on the other side," suggested Kit Kenyon.

"Yes, that is what we must do. We have a little daylight left, and may as well use it in looking for the trail. But we had better divide, so as to cover more ground. If you will go to the right, Kit, and our young friend will go to the left, I will strike a bee line across, and it is likely that one of us will come upon it. We will meet here within an hour at the furthest."

The three men started across the rocky space, and were soon out of each other's sight on the other side.

Some time before the hour was up, Harry Poindexter found his way back to the rendezvous, and was soon joined by Kit Kenyon.

"Have you found anything?" inquired Kit.

"No, indeed. Have you?"

"Not a sign of anything. I am sure there was no trail in the ground I covered. I hope that Jake Nemo has had better luck."

"He has better skill, no doubt—much better than I have, at least."

"I wish he would come back."

So did Harry, but they waited until the appointed hour had passed and he did not arrive. The sun had then set and darkness was coming on so rapidly that any further attempt at trailing was out of the question.

They waited half an hour longer, and then the sable mantle of night began to descend upon the scene, and their hearts were full of a heavier apprehension than they were willing to express in words.

Kit Kenyon became so uneasy that he crossed the stony plateau, and looked in vain in the timber for his comrade, and in vain called him by name. He saw nothing of him, and got no response.

It was quite dark when he returned to Harry Poindexter, and reported his failure.

It was clear that they could remain no longer there, and equally clear that it was useless to search for Jake Nemo.

Sadly they picked their way back to the path, and returned to the Poindexter Ranch.

Arthur Poindexter was bewildered by the news they brought, and Harry was quite overcome by the bad result of their expedition. He had taken a great liking to the dwarf, and was sorely grieved by his strange disappearance.

"What can have become of him?" was all that either of them could say.

"I don't know," sadly answered Kenyon. "I am as ignorant in this matter as the greenest tenderfoot that ever lost his way in the wilderness. Some accident must have happened to him; he has got into trouble in some way; but I can't imagine how or what it is."

"Perhaps he found the men he was looking for, or was found by them," suggested Harry. "You know, Mr. Kenyon, that he told us that they were not likely to be far from the place where they left the path. He thought they had a den somewhere about there, and perhaps he has run into it."

"That is possible," replied Kit. "I only know that I am very uneasy about him, and that I won't be able to rest until I find him. But there is no use in trying to do anything to-night, and we must wait until morning."

"Suppose," said Arthur Poindexter, "that he has merely been detained by going too far or losing his way, would he be able to find his way back here at night?"

"I believe he could find his way here, if he was able to walk and free to come."

"Then we can only wait until morning."

They waited, as there was nothing else they could do; but the morning came, and Jake Nemo had not put in his appearance, and the question still was, what had become of him?

CHAPTER VI.

HUNG BY THE NECK.

It is probable that Jake Nemo was quite as

much surprised as his friends were by the manner of his disappearance, though he had the advantage of them in knowing just how it happened.

Shortly after he entered the timber he found the missing trail, the tracks of the two horses being easily visible in the soft earth under the trees, and he followed it as rapidly as possible, being anxious to learn as much as he could before the daylight left him.

He made no attempt to communicate his discovery to his friends, as that would have been a needless waste of time, and he did not require their assistance.

His senses seemed to be unusually acute, and he found himself able to follow the trail without an effort as he passed through the timber at a rapid walk.

The feeling of success was so strong upon him that he was sure he was upon the eve of some great discovery.

It did not occur to him that he might be upon the verge of a great disaster.

One discovery came to him quite suddenly, when he found his progress stopped by an abrupt wall of rock that seemed to bring the trail to an end.

It did not bring it to an end, however, as he then saw where it ran into a well-trodden trail, proving that he had been right in his supposition that the men he was following knew the precise point they were aiming at.

The plain trail came from the south along the foot of the wall of rock, and turned toward the west through a narrow pass or crevice in the road.

"I am coming to something now," muttered the dwarf. "They must have a den in here."

He did not hesitate, but pushed right on into the pass. It might be as well to go a little further—just a little—so that he might have matter of consequence to report to his friends.

It was quite dark in that crevice, and he soon came to the conclusion that it would not be advisable to press his investigation further at that hour and alone.

But there was a place ahead of him where the rocky walls appeared to widen, leaving a broader space which it might be well to examine.

He stepped forward carefully, and found himself in what looked, as he cast his eyes upward, like a large well-hole, beyond which the pass narrowed again.

Suddenly there was a rush from each side of this dark hole, and he was seized and overpowered before he fairly knew what was the matter.

He struggled furiously and desperately; but his assailants were too many for him, and his struggles only gained him a severe pounding.

When they had conquered and disarmed him, they tied his hands behind his back, and proceeded to blindfold him, though the darkness would seem to render such a precaution unnecessary.

Then he was led through the remainder of the pass, and onward and upward, his captors turning and winding with him as if the intention was to bewilder him. He could not form the faintest idea of the direction he was taking, but

was sure that he was going upward, and that his feet trod on nothing but rock.

Finally he was brought to a halt, and by the coolness and dampness of the air he judged that he was in a cavern.

A man was at each side of him, holding his arms, and a murmur of voices told him that he was in the presence of a number of others.

Then one voice sounded loud and clear above all the others, and its accents fell upon the ear of the prisoner with startling distinctness.

"There is the man, boys. That is the galoot who calls himself Jake Nemo. Some of you have cause to know him well, and all of you know who and what he is. We have got him, and the question is, what shall we do with him?"

The dwarf gave no heed to these utterances, momentous as they were, and bearing so directly upon his fate. He was intensely occupied in wondering where he was and into whose hands he had fallen, and in listening, not to words, but to accents, in the hope of recognizing some tone with which he was familiar.

In this he was not successful. All were strangers to him, as far as he could judge by using his ears only.

The man who had spoken again raised his voice, and the dwarf was sure that he would never forget those tones, though he did not remember to have heard them before.

"What shall we do with him, boys? I say that we ought to hang him. All in favor of hanging him will say ay. Those opposed will say no."

Nemo strained his hearing to listen to the voices, but they were so bunched up and confused that he could not distinguish any of them from the others. But it was plain enough that the ayes had it by a large majority. In fact, his death was voted almost unanimously by the people there assembled, whoever they were.

He awoke to the purpose and the peril of the situation.

"Take him out and hang him!" ordered the leader.

It was high time to be doing or saying something for himself.

Evidently there was nothing that he could do; but his tongue was still uncontrolled.

"What does this mean?" he demanded, raising his voice. "Who are you, and why have you brought me here? What have I ever done to you, that you want to hang me?"

"No matter who we are," sternly replied the leader. "It is enough that we know you and mean to put you out of our way. It has been voted that you shall hang, because it is thought best to get rid of you in that way. Take him out, boys, and hang him!"

Jake Nemo was certain that he would never forget that voice while he lived; but he had the best of reason for believing that he would not live long to remember it.

The men at each side of him seized his arms and marched him away, and he was sensible of the fact that others went before and behind him.

They passed out of the cavern, as he knew by the change in the quality of the air and by the breeze that was blowing outside, and moved on,

still over a rocky surface, a short distance, and halted again.

There was nothing said by his conductors that he could distinguish. They had moved forward as silently and slowly as a funeral procession. But when they halted something happened that told him more plainly than speech the doom that surely awaited him.

A noose was thrown around his neck and tightened there.

Assuredly this was no joke—nothing but dead and dire earnest.

Whoever and whatever his captors were, they had a deadly grudge against him and meant to satisfy it with his life.

He was still blindfolded, and his sense of hearing conveyed to him no information, as the silence about him was not broken by as much as a whisper.

There was a suddenness about this thing, as well as a secrecy, that troubled even the strong nerves of Jake Nemo. For years he had carried his life in his hand, and had often been in deadly peril; but never before had he had anything like such an experience as this. To think that he must be put to death so silently and mysteriously and speedily and certainly, almost made a coward of him for the moment.

Hopeless as any effort of his own might be, he spoke again for his life.

"Who are you? Why do you want to hang me? What have I ever done to any of you? It is a shame to send a man off in this style."

"String him up!" was the only reply he got, in cold, incisive tones that sent a chill through all his veins.

He was pushed forward a few steps, and he felt the noose tighten about his neck again.

He was then standing, though he did not know it, on the edge of a rocky chasm, over which stretched the stout branch of a gnarled tree. The rope had been thrown over the branch, beyond the edge of the chasm, and in another moment it fastened there securely.

His last hour had come, and there was nothing he could do or say to avert his doom.

Not another word was spoken.

Only a signal was given, and he was pushed over the edge, to swing by the rope in the empty air from the branch above him.

CHAPTER VII.

BLUE DICK'S MATINEE.

HOMESTRETCH had a new sensation.

It had had many sensations since the almost fabulous discoveries of placer-gold had suddenly transformed it from a wilderness into a busy and prosperous mining settlement, and some of its sensations had been strong enough to tear the camp up by the roots, as it were.

But the advent of Blue Dick was not an everyday occurrence, and it created no little excitement, especially among the saloons and their frequenters.

He was well known in Homestretch, personally as well as by reputation. He seldom visited the camp; but when he did there was a "tearin' down time," and he always caused his presence to be known and his visit to be remembered. Previous to this occasion fully a month had elapsed since he "dropped in on the boys."

The excitement caused by his advent this time was largely due to the fact that he came with his pockets full of money, and that he hastened to make that fact known in the readiest and most agreeable manner.

He struck the Occidental Saloon, and gratified the proprietor by throwing a heavy gold piece on the counter and inviting all hands to have a drink. Again and again he "set them up," and became the prince of the hour. The news of his presence and of his liberality spread through the camp, and there was no lack of attendants at Blue Dick's matinee.

Among those whom his advent attracted to him was Frank Burrick, the Sheriff of Oro county, a wiry little man, not formidable to look at, but of undoubted courage and capacity, who possessed the confidence of his constituents to a remarkable degree.

He was not drawn to the matinee by a desire to poison himself at the expense of the principal performer, nor even by ordinary curiosity; but by a professional interest in that pilgrim from the upper regions.

Blue Dick was a person in whom the sheriff might at any time become suddenly and strongly interested, as his career was generally supposed to be a lawless one. It was known that he had his abiding-place high up in the hills, with a number of others of his stripe, who were miscellaneously known as Blue Dick's band, or Blue Dick's gang, and who were not regarded as candidates for Sunday school teachers or for admission into select circles of Homestretch society.

But Frank Burrick had never yet seen Blue Dick, and he came to the Occidental to "size him up."

The sheriff found him to be a tall and well-built young fellow, of twenty-five or thereabout, with bronzed features, jet-black hair and mustache, brilliant black eyes when they were not dulled by too much drink, and a general appearance of being ready and fit for any work the devil might cut out for him. He was dressed in the regulation "mountain screamer" style, with trousers of stout cloth tucked in high boots, broad felt hat, blue flannel shirt, and the usual armory, over which he wore a short velvet coat with a large assortment of pockets. On his left cheek was a large purplish spot, apparently a birth-mark.

He was scattering his money lavishly and loosely, and appeared to have plenty in his pockets.

On this subject the sheriff had a conversation with Tom Orcutt, one of the leading citizens of Homestretch.

"Blue Dick is in town to-day, and he has loads of money," said the sheriff. "Where do you suppose he got it?"

"I haven't the least idea," replied the other. "They have been keeping right quiet up there in the hills for a long time. I have heard of no stage robbery, or bank robbery, or cattle robbery, or any other kind of robbery about here since last fall, more than six months ago."

"Just so; but when Blue Dick is flush it is reasonable to suppose that somebody has suffered. I suppose he has been operating at some distance from here, and we haven't heard how he got his work in."

"Who came to the camp with him to-day, Frank?"

"A stumpy, red-headed Irishman."

"That is Paddy Whack, as they call him, Blue Dick's most particular partner. Suppose you tackle him and pump him."

Frank Burrick did tackle the Irishman, but found him very close-mouthed and so dry that the pump brought up nothing but sand.

"Sure an' he's got as gud a right to have money as anny av the rest av yez," replied Paddy Whack. "An' phwat do I know about it? I'm ownly his hoired man, sor, an' I kem in to look afther him. If he gits dhronk, I'm to take him out in the wuds an' watch him till he shapes it off, sor. Phwy don't yez ax him some questions an' git a quick answer, sor?"

But the sheriff did not attempt to question Blue Dick, and that celebrity, finding the pastime of "setting them up" rather monotonous, went into a gambling-den near by.

He stayed there but a little while, only long enough to feed a few of his dollars to the tiger, and returned to the Occidental.

As he entered the saloon he saw an erect old man, with a very handsome young woman at his side, pass slowly up the street.

"By the holy Satan!" exclaimed Blue Dick, as he struck a dramatic attitude. "There is my destiny!"

"Where is it, Dick?" eagerly inquired a bummer at his elbow. "I didn't see you drop anythin'."

"I'll drop on you for a fool if you don't hold your tongue. Go and soak your head. Not another drink do you get here at my expense. Jimmy, my boy, who is that daisy?"

"The young lady out there?" replied the barkeeper. "She is a daisy, and no mistake. The old man is Adam Wynne, and she is his daughter. This is the second time they have been seen in Homestretch. I reckon they have come to do a little buyin'."

"She can buy me cheap. Is she married?"

"No, but she can be, as quick as a wink. The camp is full of capitalists who would be glad to invest in her."

"I am willing to go my last dollar on the show of the outcrop, without waiting for an assay. Where does she live?"

The barkeeper answered this question, and several others that his liberal customer propounded, to the best of his ability.

In the course of these inquiries Blue Dick had not absorbed a single drink. At last he woke up to a sense of his responsibilities in that line.

"Talking is dry work. Set 'em up lively, Jimmy. Walk up, gentlemen all, and drink the health of old Satan's favorite son! Does anybody know what has become of Paddy Whack?"

"Sure an' I'm here, sor," replied that quiet and unobtrusive benchman.

"Come and take a parting drink, Paddy, and then we'll slide off."

"I hope you ain't really goin' to leave us," said the barkeeper.

"I am though. I've got business to attend to, and must leave while my head is level."

And he did leave immediately. He and the Irishman mounted their horses, and trotted

briskly out of Homestretch, followed by the wistful gaze of the Occidental's barkeeper.

"Blue Dick has gone crazy about Adam Wynne's daughter," mused Jimmy. "He ain't the only one in that fix, but I reckon he is by long odds the wu'st, and she had better look out for herself."

Blue Dick and his companion struck off into the hills, and soon entered a mountain trail, which they followed up and down, but mainly up. It was a very difficult trail, and its crooked course seemed likely to lead to nowhere in particular; but both they and their sure-footed beasts knew well whither they were going.

After a few hours of hard travel, they came to a wall of rock along which the trail led, and this wall of rock was broken by a cleft just large enough to permit the passage of a horse.

As they turned into the cleft Blue Dick sounded a whistle, which was answered from a little distance, and they rode on through the pass, coming out into a region of rocky cliffs and ravines that seemed to have been thrown together by nature in an angry mood.

Turning to the right, they rode up a stony slope, and entered a large hollow in the cliff before them, where they dismounted and left the two horses in the charge of a man who was waiting there.

The broad hollow, which was rather too open to be called a cavern, proved to be but a vestibule to a series of similar apartments, not so open, one of which they entered, and found it lighted by a big fire, as well as by wicks swimming in vessels of fat.

Several men were lounging in that apartment, and among them was an old man with gray hair and beard, who stepped forward to meet the new-comers.

He was a man whom Blue Dick usually addressed as "Dad," and spoke of to others as "the old man." If he had any other name, it was not known to those with whom he associated in that mountain den.

"Hello, Dick, my boy!" he joyfully exclaimed. "Back already? Sober, too, as I'm a sinner!"

"Yes, dad, straight as a shingle, thanks to old Satan!"

"You didn't spend all your money, then?"

"Not much of it. I had enough of Homestretch after a short pull. The fact is, old man, I got something into my head that drove the whisky out."

"It must have been as big as a bear, then. In the name of your old friend Satan, Dick, what was it?"

"Let me sit down a bit, so that I can break it to you kinder easy. I have made up my mind, old man, to settle down and get married."

"Snakes and buzzards! What in the name of all the gracious demons has put that into your head?"

"I saw the girl that I mean to marry. She was walking in Homestretch with her father, and I was standing in front of the Occidental when I caught sight of her. As soon as I saw her I was gone. Right then and there I determined to take her on her own terms, and of course I shall marry her. You needn't be

afraid of losing me, dad. I expect to settle down and go to housekeeping here, and both of us will take care of you."

"Have you asked her?" inquired the old man.

"Not yet."

"I thought so. Do you know her?"

"Never saw her before to-day, and haven't said a word to her yet."

"Perhaps you will slip up, then. What makes you think that she will marry you?"

"Because she will have to. That's all, and it is enough. I know where she lives, alone with her father, and it will be the easiest thing in the world to run over there, and pick her up, and bring her here, and then it won't make any difference what she says."

"That is one way to get a wife. Do you as much as know her name, Dick?"

"I know her father's name."

"What is that?"

"Adam Wynne."

The old man, who was standing at the time, staggered backward until he almost fell. His face took on a ghastly hue, and he gasped as if he could hardly get his breath.

"What is the matter, old man?" demanded Dick, in a tone that had in it more surprise than sympathy.

"Not that man, Dick. Leave that man alone. Don't take his daughter away from him!"

"Why not? What have you to do with that man? What do you know about him?"

"I will tell you some time—that is, I may tell you. There can be but one Adam Wynne. Whatever you do, Dick, don't take his daughter away from him!"

"That's rotten nonsense. I tell you, old man. I mean to get that girl and have her for my own, and if the angels and all that business stood in the way they shouldn't stop me. Now I am going to look after the galoot we hung."

"Never mind him, Dick. He is safe enough."

"It is time to cut him down and give him a drop. Come, Paddy."

Blue Dick went out with the Irishman, but soon returned, and there was a puzzled look on his face.

"Did you cut him down, Dick?" asked the old man.

"There was nothing to cut down. He is gone!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A HARD STRUGGLE FOR LIFE.

DWARF JAKE had been hung by the neck, but the job was not thoroughly well done, though it may have equaled the efforts of some professional hangmen.

When he was swung off the noose loosened, and the knot slipped around under his jaw. As the drop was slight, this made quite a difference in his situation.

It was painful enough, to be sure, as he swung there by the neck; but death was not instantaneous, nor did it seem likely to come to him very quickly.

Dark as it was, one of the men noticed the bungle that had been made, and called the attention of his chief to it.

"The rope has slipped," said this man. "I believe the cuss has got it under his jaw."

"That is right," was the answer, in the same tone that had pronounced the doom of the dwarf. "He has got to hang there, anyhow, and if he has a hard time in dying it is no more than he deserves. The rope is sure to strangle him."

"Sure to strangle him!" These words stuck in the dwarf's ears, and their truth was painfully apparent.

He was in full possession of all his senses. In fact, they were remarkably wike awake just then, and he knew precisely what he had to expect.

He was not a heavy-weight, fortunately, and his neck was short and stout; but the downward pull of his body would increase the strain of the rope, which was becoming more unbearable with every instant of time, and before long—not very long—he must surely die. The buzzards need not be expected before morning; but they would find their feast ready.

His only chance for life lay in freeing his hands from the cord that tied them behind his back, and it was no wonder that he listened intently to the departing foot steps of his executioners, his heart throbbing as they died away in the rocky walk.

As soon as he believed that the men who had just left him were out of sight and hearing, he began to struggle for his life.

Pressing his jaw down against the fatal rope, with the object of preventing the knot from shifting its position, he wrenched desperately at the cord that tied his hands, in the hope that he might pull them loose or break the hemp.

Greatly to his surprise he was successful.

Though the effort cut his flesh to the bone, a strand of the cord burst, and he easily freed himself from the remainder.

Carefully raising his hands above his head, he grasped the rope, relieved his neck and jaw from the terrible strain, and, in spite of his lacerated wrists, drew himself up to the bough to which the rope was fastened.

There he paused to rest and to bless the rotten cord.

He soon descended the tree, carrying with him the rope, which he wound about his waist under his coat, as if he meant to keep it as a remembrance of that night's experience.

The night was very dark, but the sharp-sighted dwarf was easily able to take his bearings.

He perceived that he stood on a shelf of rock, some ten yards in width, on one side of which was the apparently unfathomable abyss over which he had swung by the neck, and on the other a perpendicular cliff reaching up to an unknown height, which he need not think of attempting to climb.

The shelf of rock sloped upward toward him, and he knew that he had been brought over an ascending grade from the place where he was doomed to death.

Therefore he must descend the slope to reach the cleft in the rock by which he had made his way into that den of wolves.

He bound up his bleeding wrists as well as he could with strips of his handkerchief, using his teeth to tie the knots, and followed the downward grade of the shelf, walking slowly and

cautiously, lest he should lose his footing in the darkness, or run into a nest of his enemies.

Soon he discovered that he had come to the end of the cliff, or that it made a bend to the left, and he followed around the bend, keeping close to the rock, as he was thus less liable to lose his way.

His next discovery was of a faint light that came from the interior of the rock, and he crept forward until he found himself at the edge of a wide hollow in the cliff.

Inside he heard the noise of horses champing and stamping, and by the dim light he saw a man armed with a rifle, who seemed to be acting as sentry there.

"This is the den of the wolves," he muttered.

There could be no doubt that it was a good place to get away from, especially as his captors had left him no sort of weapon, and he proceeded to get away.

He knew that his route from the pass to the cavern, like that from the cavern to his place of execution, had been on an ascending grade, and that he must still go downward to find the pass.

So he effaced himself in the darkness by creeping among the pieces of broken rock until he was out of sight of the mouth of the cavern, and made a bee-line in the direction in which he hoped to find an exit.

His judgment was right, and he struck the pass sooner than he had expected to.

But there was no escape for him in that quarter. A glance showed him that the pass was guarded by two armed sentries, and he was compelled to seek cover again to avoid their observation.

Possibly there might be an opening further down, and he carefully picked his way in that direction; but, in spite of his utmost caution, he nearly lost his life by falling into an abyss. It was doubtless the same that had been under him when he swung from the tree, and a brief period of perilous inquiry told him that it turned until it joined the wall of rock through which he had passed in the evening.

He was forced to the conclusion that there was no passage outward for him anywhere about there—none, at least, that he would dare to attempt in the night-time, and there was but one course left him.

That was to go back to the point from which he had started.

Then he would be out of the immediate vicinity of the men who had trapped him, and might hope to find a way of escape when daylight came to aid him.

The return journey was difficult and wearisome, the more so as the sense of failure depressed his spirits and reduced his energy; but he safely got by the pass and the cavern, and then it was a comparatively easy task to strike the corner of the cliff and proceed along its base to the tree that had been used as his gallows.

This was disheartening in the extreme, and the dwarf was tired and sore; but he had no intention of stopping there.

He knew well enough that if he should be caught there by his previous captors, they would use no ceremony in making an end of him.

Therefore it was necessary to find some way of escape or a hiding-place, and his only chance was to ascend the shelf of rock toward the north.

He did so, keeping close to the base of the cliff as before, but had gone only a little distance when he found his progress in that direction completely cut off by the high wall of rock, which made an abrupt turn toward the south, and joined the chasm over whose depths he had hung.

Beaten at all points, the dwarf sat down to rest and consider the situation.

He had found a den of wolves which appeared to be absolutely impregnable. Although his investigations had been conducted at night, and under great disadvantages, he believed that he could make a nearly perfect map of that natural fortification, shut in on one side by an impassable ravine, and on the other by an impassable wall of rock, through which the only entrance was by a narrow cleft which could be easily defended by a few men against an army. What more eligible location could the most fastidious wolves desire?

He also found himself a prisoner in that fortification, and this was the bitterest of his reflections. There was no way of escape, as far as he had been able to discover, and no chances that he would ever get out to give the world the benefit of his survey.

Groping about at the base of the cliff, he found a hole in the rock near the place where he had been seated, and at once crawled into it. It was large enough to admit his body, and might serve as a hiding-place in an emergency.

As he went in he perceived that he did not come to the end of the hole, and he thought that he had better go further. It might lead to something, and at the worst he could find his way back.

The hole was of course as dark as pitch, and so small that he was obliged to crawl on his hands and knees, but he was encouraged to go on by fancying that he saw a light ahead.

Pretty soon the fancy became a certainty. There was a faint light ahead, but he could not tell what made it or where it came from.

As he groped his way toward the light his hand fell upon something soft, and he withdrew it immediately.

The touch was followed by a mumbling noise that surely came from a human throat.

It was evident that he had reached the end of the hole, and that it terminated in the den of wolves. But his touch had not aroused the sleeper, and he quietly moved backward.

Feeling carefully about he was convinced that the hole branched off in another direction near the entrance of the cavern, and he determined to follow the new lead, as he could not feel safe where he was.

On he went into the total darkness, leaving behind him the faint light which had seemed so like a friend, but had only led him to his enemies.

He was obliged to grope his way through the turnings and windings of this new passage, which was at times so small that he could scarcely squeeze by the points of rock and other

obstructions that he found in his way, but he pressed on, believing that what had a beginning must have an end—that what led from somewhere must lead to somewhere.

A sense of suffocation came over him as he thought that he might get jammed in that hole and never be able to go forward or to retrace his course, and this, combined with his extreme exhaustion, caused him to sink down helplessly on the damp rock.

But he soon recovered enough of his strength and energy to enable him to take up his toilsome task again, and he pushed on until, after a long and wearisome struggle, he felt the breath of wind on his face.

It was actually wind, almost a breeze, and he retained his senses sufficiently to know that it was nothing like the close and quiet air of the hole through which he had been passing.

It was the free air of the mountains, clear, cool, and infinitely refreshing.

From the bowels of the rock and out of that terrible hole he had emerged to the open and to safety.

The joy of this discovery overcame him again, and he sunk upon the ground, unconscious of anything more.

CHAPTER IX.

AN ENCOUNTER WITH BLUE DICK.

It was broad daylight when the dwarf awoke from the stupor that had served him for sleep. The sun was shining brightly, but he was damp and chilly.

Where was he?

Surely not in the den of wolves, nor in the fortification from which he had not expected to escape.

Behind him was a mountainous elevation, and there at its base was the hole from which he had emerged.

But it did not face the chasm which had worried him in the night-time, nor was it at the foot of a perpendicular wall of rock, and it was not the end of the hole at which he had entered.

There could be no doubt that he had not only escaped from the den of wolves, but had discovered a secret way of getting inside of it.

Inwardly congratulating himself upon his good fortune, and at the same time feeling a strong inward craving for something to eat, he set out to rejoin his friends.

But he had not yet finished his mental map of the place where he had fallen into the hands of unknown but deadly enemies, and the surest way to get back to the Poindexter Ranch would be to start from the pass where he had been captured.

So he started to find the pass.

There was no trail near the mouth of the hole; but he soon struck what he believed to be the wall of rock, and after proceeding a little further south, he came to the pass.

He was sure of it. There was the cleft in the wall of rock, with a plain trail leading up to it, and he ventured to look inside, but saw no person there.

Without attempting to make any further investigations, he dashed through the woods and crossed the stony plateau which he so well remembered.

Hardly had he entered the timber on the other side, when he heard voices and footsteps approaching him, and he hastened to conceal himself behind a clump of bushes.

In a few moments he emerged from that retreat, because he recognized one of the voices as that of Kit Kenyon, and perceived that the Poindexter Brothers and two other men were with him.

The meeting was a joyful one, and Harry Poindexter was absolutely ecstatic in the gladness with which he greeted his new friend.

"We were just starting out to hunt for you," said Kenyon. "Where have you been, and what has happened to you?"

"It is a long story," replied Nemo, "and I can only hope that none of you may ever have such an experience as I went through last night. I am hungry and worn out. When we get to the ranch I will tell you all about it as soon as I can."

With the help of his friends he reached the Poindexter Ranch, where he was fed and cared for. While he satisfied his hunger and thirst he told his story, emphasizing it by showing the noosed rope and his lacerated hands.

All were intensely interested, and the question was who had been his captors, and why they had sought to kill him.

"It must be Blue Dick's gang," remarked Arthur Poindexter. "I can't think of any others in these parts who would be likely to do such a deed."

"Who are they?" demanded the dwarf.

"I know nothing of them except what I have heard, and that is only a little. We might learn more of them at Homestretch."

"Very well. I will go to Homestretch tomorrow morning. Now I must rest and recruit."

The dwarf's wounded wrists were bound up, and he devoted the rest of the day and the night to rest, as he found himself exhausted by his mental and physical trials.

In the morning he was quite himself again, and he and Kit Kenyon, provided with horses from the Poindexter Ranch, set out for Homestretch.

They did not go alone. Harry Poindexter insisted on accompanying them, and his brother also had a strong desire to visit the camp just then.

After Jake Nemo had completed his purchase of weapons and their appurtenances, to replace those which had been taken from him, the party "brought up" at the Occidental for the purpose of rest and casual refreshments.

They had been there but a little while when another party entered the saloon, headed by a tall and noticeable young man, who had a large purplish spot on one side of his face.

This personage stepped to the bar and called "the crowd" up to drink, as if he was ordering them to charge a battery.

"Come up here, all of you, and take a drink with the favorite son of old Satan!"

Jake Nemo started at the sound of that voice as if he had been shot.

"That must be Blue Dick," whispered Arthur Poindexter.

The invitation, which amounted to a com-

mand, was cheerfully accepted by all the men in the saloon, with the exception of the party of four from the Poindexter Ranch.

Blue Dick, perceiving that they held back, strode toward them, a heavy frown expressing his disapproval of their conduct.

"Why don't you come up and drink?" he demanded.

"Because we don't happen to be thirsty," answered the dwarf, turning quickly so that he faced the questioner.

Blue Dick started back suddenly, and his face became livid, the purple spot standing out from his sallow cheek so that it was really horrible to look at.

But he quickly recovered his self-possession, if not his usual color and demeanor.

"Why do you stare at me so?" he exclaimed.

"Did you ever see me before?"

"Never to my knowledge," replied Nemo.

"Do you think you will know me when you see me again?"

"I am sure of it."

"Do you take me for a man who wants to be stared at, you wizen-faced baboon?"

"I don't take you for any sort of a man. I take you for a wolf."

"A wolf! Do you hear that, boys? This miserable abortion dares to call me a wolf. I will show him how much of a wolf I am. He don't seem to have any beauty to spare; but I will make a blackberry roll of his face in less than five minutes."

Kit Kenyon quietly rose from his seat and placed himself in front of his friend.

Kit had quite recovered from his severe illness, and was, as he had often been said to be, "a splendid figure of a man," a fine contrast to the equally tall but loose-jointed and "gangling" form of the mountain-man.

"You are counting too fast," said he. "You won't lay a finger on this man."

"How do you know I won't?" retorted Blue Dick. "Who the deuce are you?"

"Only a baby, one of this spring's chickens; but I have cut my eye teeth and my spurs are grown."

It was clear to Jake Nemo, as he looked at his friend, that Kit Kenyon was himself again. With all his old-time lightness and good-humor he appeared to welcome a fray as a young girl rejoices in the thought of going to a ball.

Blue Dick stared at his new antagonist, and the fiery red of passion flamed in his cheeks.

"Satan kick me!" he exclaimed, "if I don't pull your teeth and cut your comb. Come, boys, let's clean out these airy galoots. They are putting on too many frills to suit the Homestretch style."

Kit Kenyon smiled, probably thinking that the desperado was quicker to call on his friends than to carry out the contract he had proposed to undertake.

Two men, who had quietly stepped into the saloon during the wordy war, walked toward what seemed to be the weaker party.

They were Frank Burrick, the sheriff of Oro county, and Tom Orcutt.

Arthur Poindexter stepped forward, and became a conspicuous figure in the group.

Harry took his stand at his brother's side.

"If there is any fighting to be done," remarked Arthur, "I propose to take a hand in the game."

"So do I," said Frank Burrick. "As sheriff of the county, I command all present to keep the peace; but, if you will fight, you must count me in."

A short, stocky, red-haired Irishman, who had kept close to Blue Dick, touched him on the shoulder, and whispered to him, but in a tone that could be heard by most of those present.

"Yez musn't fool wid no fightin' now, sir. It w'u'd play the divil wid business."

"You are right, Paddy," answered his chief. "I am not a man to be bluffed by a sheriff, or by any such crowd as I see here; but I have important matters to attend to, and must postpone the pleasure of cleaning out these galoots. The next time I meet them they won't get off so easy."

"I suppose we ought to be a great deal more thankful to you than we are," remarked Kit.

Blue Dick answered him only with a vindictive glance, and paid at the bar for the liquor he had ordered.

Jake Nemo stepped forward, and claimed the floor for a brief speech.

"I have kept the rope that was knotted for me," he said. "When it is used again, I will do the hanging."

The desperado turned and dashed toward the speaker; but the burly Irishman seized him and drew him away, and Blue Dick left the saloon, followed by the men who had come in with him.

In a few moments Jake Nemo and his friends also left the saloon.

They were followed by Frank Burrick and Tom Orcutt, and the former spoke to the dwarf.

"I don't want to be inquisitive," said he; "but you know who I am, and I have a reason for asking what you meant when you spoke of a rope and of hanging."

"I am quite willing to tell you," answered the dwarf; "but I must first introduce myself. Did you ever hear of Jake Nemo?"

"Hear of him? I should say I have. Are you the man? Of course you are. I might have known it. I am glad enough to meet you, sir, as I am sure to strike something interesting now. Please come to my office with your friends, and let us talk over matters."

In the shanty that did service as the sheriff's office, the six men were made acquainted with each other, and Frank Burrick impatiently awaited the revelations he expected.

"Was that Blue Dick who tackled us in the saloon?" he asked.

"Yes," answered the sheriff.

"What is the rest of his name?"

"I don't know. I never heard anything else. I supposed you knew him."

"I never saw him before; but I have met him."

"How is that?"

"I was blindfolded at the time. Night before last he and his devils hung me."

Frank Burrick was astonished, and he opened his eyes yet wider as Nemo told his story, which of course included an account of the tragedy at the deserted camp of Cacheton.

"You must be on the right track," said the sheriff. "There is hardly a doubt of that in my mind. But I wonder why they wanted to hang you."

"There are plenty of scamps who have grudges against me, for that matter," replied Nemo. "Perhaps those men had heard that I was hunting the murderers of Mrs. Kenyon. I have made no secret of it."

"That may be the reason. I have been wanting to get a pull at Blue Dick since I took office here as sheriff, but haven't been able to fasten anything on him. He has been flush of money lately, and I have wondered where he got it, as nobody about here knows of any strike he has made. If we could bring that murder a little nearer to him, I would be glad to go for him."

"He and his gang will be tough subjects to tackle," remarked the dwarf.

"Like enough; but you have found their den, and that is a strong point, though it seems to be a hard place to get at."

"I have also found a secret way to get into the den, and I doubt if the wolves themselves know of that."

"You have? That is glorious. I can almost see Blue Dick swinging at the end of a rope."

"Not quite, though. There's many a slip 'twixt the neck and the slip-noose."

CHAPTER X.

A DASTARDLY BLOW.

AFTER her perilous adventure with the sudden spring flood Clara Wynne was not again allowed by her father to go down into the valley, or even to wander out of sight of her home.

This was a sad disappointment to her, not only because she liked to be out in the pleasant weather that the early days of June were bringing to the mountains, but because she missed the chances she might have had of meeting Harry Poindexter.

She readily confessed to herself that she admired the handsome and manly young fellow, and she had reason to believe that the admiration was reciprocal.

She could not expect to see him at her father's house, as he had not been invited to repeat his visit, and her only hope of meeting him was built upon a base of mere chance.

So she stayed at home, and devoted herself to the entertainment of her father, like the good girl that she was, knowing that his life was by no means a pleasant one, and that she was his only comfort and delight.

It was near the close of day, and Adam Wynne and his daughter were seated in front of the cabin, enjoying a pleasant breeze, and gazing westward at the splendid view of mountain and forest on which the setting sun was shedding its glory.

The sound of footsteps caused them to turn their heads to the right, and they saw near them two men, who seemed to have been toiling up the mountain path, and who looked worn and weary.

They were roughly dressed, and might have been supposed to be miners or ranchers, had not their armament been rather heavier than seemed to be necessary.

"Scuse me, colonel," said one of them; "but we've kinder lost our way in these hills."

"Where were you wanting to go to?" coldly asked the old man.

"We wanted to strike a camp they call Homestretch, hearin' that thar was work thar fur honest miners."

"You have got badly out of the way of any road or trail that leads to Homestretch. I don't see how you could have done it, wherever you came from."

"We tried to take a short cut, and got tangled up in the hills. We're powerful hungry, gineral—hain't had a bite since last night. Cain't you give us a taste o' grub?"

"Wait here, and I will see what there is in the house. Come, Clara."

The old man stepped inside; but his object in so doing was to get his pistol, as he did not like the looks of the strangers.

He supposed that Clara was following him; but he had hardly entered the cabin when he heard her scream.

He turned quickly, and saw her seized by a third person, a tall man with a mask on his face.

The plot and its purpose was plain. The two men who pretended to have lost their way were a cover for the approach of a third, whose aim was Clara.

Her father started to go to her assistance; but the two first comers were in his way, and they jumped upon him, throwing him down on the floor of the cabin.

"Tie him and leave him," ordered the tall man, in whose arms the girl was struggling.

Clara could only struggle and scream; but her screams showed that her lungs were sound, and her struggles gave her captor no little trouble.

There was no man within hearing, except her helpless father and her enemies; but there was a woman at hand.

Sally, Mr. Wynne's stout negro servant, who had gone to the spring for water, heard the first scream of her young mistress, dropped both her pails, and ran to her assistance. She flew at the tall man like a tigress, tore the mask from his face, and mauled and scratched him so that Clara nearly freed herself from his grasp, and he was forced to call for help.

By this time his two comrades had tied Mr. Wynne securely, and they hastened to aid their chief.

One of them struck Sally a savage blow with his fist, knocking her senseless, and the three swiftly dragged Clara away down the mountain path.

It was some time before Sally recovered her consciousness, and in the mean time Adam Wynne groaned and writhed in pain and impotent anger.

At last she got up, rubbing her head, and vowing that she felt as if she had been struck by lightning, and hobbled to the house, where the sight of her master, stretched on the floor, and bound hand and foot, dazed her again.

"Lawful sakes!" she exclaimed. "Dis yer's de debbil's own work, fur shuah. W'ots dey been doin' to you, sah?"

"Hold your tongue, and come and untie me quick!" he ordered.

Sally hastened to obey, and the old man rose to his feet, stretched his limbs, and stared about in a dazed way.

"Where is Clara?" he asked.

"Dunno, sah. Dey done toted her off, pore lamb."

"Yes, I know. Oh, the infernal villains! Which way did they go, Sally?"

"Down de hill, sah."

"Where is my gun? I must go in pursuit of them at once."

"No, sah. Dar ain't no use in yo' tryin' to do dat. Dey's got fur away, an' it's dark a'ready, an' you'd nebber begin to ketch 'em."

Mr. Wynne sunk into a chair. The outrage was such a terrible one, and he felt himself to be so helpless, that his heart gave way, and he was on the verge of fainting.

Sally hastened to bring him some liquor from a precious demijohn that was reserved for emergencies, and it revived him so that he was able to look the facts in the face and determine what ought to be done.

There was but one friend upon whom he could call for help in his time of sore trouble, and he felt that he had great cause to be thankful that Jake Nemo was near at hand.

The dwarf's friend, too, was a stalwart, active, daring young man, who could doubtless be pressed into service.

Even with their help he had little hope of being able to snatch his daughter from her ruffianly abductors; but he could do nothing more than seek them and implore their assistance, and that must be done without any loss of time.

He knew that they had gone to the Poindexter Ranch, and that he would be likely to find them there. This was an unpleasant fact, as he had taken a dislike to Harry Poindexter for no other reason than because he suspected that young man of a strong liking for Clara.

Could it be that Harry had planned the abduction?

No, that was impossible. However objectionable he might be, he was not that kind of a man, and he could hardly have put such a plot in execution without the knowledge of Jake Nemo, who would have stepped on it at once.

The old man saw clearly that he must crush out his prejudice, and seek the aid of Harry Poindexter, as well as of the others.

"Give me my thick coat, Sally," he said, as he rose from his seat.

"W'ot's dat fur, sah?" she replied, instead of obeying. "Whar's ye gwine to try to go to?"

"I am going over to the Poindexter Ranch, some five miles from here, across the valley, to tell them what has happened, and to ask their help."

"No, sah. You don't do nuffin' ob de sawt. It's gwine to be dark as a stack ob black cats, an' you'd be shuah to lose yo' way, ef you didn't tumble down befo' you got nigh dar. No, sah. You couldn't begin to do it. Dis chile's de one w'ot's gwine ober dar, an' I mean to start off dis berry minute. It's jess w'ot I'd made up my min' to do."

"Bless you, Sally! I do believe you can do it better and quicker than I can."

"Ob coss I kin. Wouldn't I run my head off

fo' de pore lamb! I kin see in de dark like a coon dog, an' I'se run ober dar like a streak ob greased lightnin'."

Sally had been putting on her hat and shawl, and was ready to start before she had finished talking.

"Jest you stay right yar, sah, an' lie down an' try to git some sleep. I'se go right ober dar, an' come back yar, an' take you ober 'arly in de mawnin'. Good-night, sah, an' de Lawd be wid you an' help de pore lamb!"

Sally did go, as she said she would, like a streak of greased lightning. At least, she made the trip more quickly than any woman could have been expected to—or any man, for that matter—making the best possible time "over flood and fell," down the mountain, across the still swollen stream, and through hills and woods along a trail that was anything but plain even by daylight, until she reached the Poindexter Ranch.

Her story was soon told, and great was the consternation it caused.

Sally's description of the principal abductor was sufficient, and was at once recognized by her hearers.

"Blue Dick!" exclaimed the dwarf. "This is my business, my friends."

His coat was on his back, and his pistol was in his belt, and he was ready to start.

"I will go with you," said Kenyon.

"No, Kit; I don't want you. If anything can be done, I can do it best alone. This young man may go with me, though."

He pointed to Harry Poindexter, who was already on his feet.

CHAPTER XI.

*CLARA AND HER CAPTORS.

IN spite of her screams and struggles Clara Wynne was dragged rapidly down the mountain-side by two of her abductors, while Blue Dick brought up the rear.

He had no fear of pursuit, but was naturally anxious to make sure of his prize and spirit her away before there could be any attempt to follow him.

They quickly reached the bottom of the valley where Clara, who was panting and almost exhausted, was allowed to rest a few moments, and Blue Dick improved the opportunity to enlighten her as to her position and his intentions.

"You will have to keep quiet from this on," he said, "unless you want to be gagged, and that might worry you more than you would like. You are going where nobody would hear you if you should scream as loud as a wild-cat, but we don't mean to have any racket, and you must agree to be quiet or take the gag dose."

"Who are you?" she demanded. "Why have you torn me away from my home and my father? What right have you to treat me so shamefully?"

"No right in the world," coolly replied Blue Dick. "I am a man who don't make much account of rights and wrongs, but do just what suits me. It is no matter who I am. You will be better acquainted with me before long. I saw you at Homestretch, and then I settled it with myself that you should be my wife."

"Your wife!" exclaimed Clara, who was so

astounded that she scarcely knew what she was saying.

"Yes, I will do the fair thing by you, and mean to make you my wife. That is my purpose, and I took the simplest and quickest way of working it out."

Clara Wynne, who had recovered her breath and her nerves, looked at him closely for the first time.

He was a tall man and well-built, but his face was by no means attractive. One of his cheeks was nearly covered by a purplish spot, which at times was almost hideous, and the good effect of his brilliant eyes and fine features was marred by their dare-devil expression.

She shuddered as her impression of the man and his intentions became fixed.

It was clear that she need not seek to move him by tears and entreaties, and that any attempts at resistance would be equally idle.

"You will come right along with us," he said. "I will treat you well if you are reasonable, but we can't have any row. Shall I help you walk to the horses?"

She repulsed his offer of assistance, and he led the way, his two assistants following her.

It was but a short distance to where four horses were tethered, and one of them with a side-saddle, and Clara was compelled to mount this one.

Blue Dick rode generally at her side, with one of his aids in advance, and the other in the rear.

There was little said by any of them. Blue Dick was not a conversationalist, and was quite unaccustomed to ladies' society. Besides, his love-making was not of the kind that uses tender words and pleasing ways. He took what he wanted because he had the power to take it, and that was all. He was simply carrying out his purpose, and in that he was fixed and resolute.

As for Clara, she knew well enough that words would be wasted in trying to melt that human iceberg, and there was nothing else that she wanted to say to him.

She had enough to do in communing with her own thoughts, which were sad and bitter beyond expression.

But she was a girl of no little strength of character, and she had perceived the necessity of looking the situation fairly in the face, so that she might meet its present and expected difficulties bravely, even if she could do nothing to help herself. She rode quietly with her captors because there was nothing else for her to do, and she was silent in order that she might better keep her own counsel.

It was just possible that she might do something to help herself. She could, at least, keep her senses wide awake, noticing the route by which she was taken, and watching for a chance to escape.

But that was a hopeless hope. The night, as Sally predicted, was "as dark as a stack of black cats," and she wondered how these men could find their way in the pathless wilderness, over ridges and through ravines, and among all the obstructions and intricacies of such a difficult mountain region.

She was soon compelled to abandon all hope

of being able to trace her course, and to admit that the most skillful pursuit would be unavailing, even if there had been a chance of such pursuit.

When she looked back, from mere instinct, and not with any expectation of aid, she did not need the sneering remarks of Blue Dick to convince her that she need look for nothing in that direction.

Her captors appeared to be in no danger of losing their way. Amid all their turnings and windings their general course was as direct, as if they knew exactly the point at which they were aiming, and before midnight they passed between high and narrow walls of stone, which made the girl feel as if she were entering a tomb.

The challenge and reply at this place told her that they had reached their home, whatever that might be.

She was led, past tramping horses and dimly-visible men, into a large and cavernous apartment, dimly lighted, where an old and gray-bearded man came forward to meet her conductors.

He spoke to Blue Dick in a tone that showed strong agitation, if not terror.

"Have you got her, Dick? Have you brought her here? Is she really Adam Wynne's daughter?"

"Yes, old man, I've got her, and have brought her here, and she is Adam Wynne's daughter."

"God in heaven!"

"Well, old man, I never knew you to look in that quarter for sympathy before. You always squint in the other direction."

"But this is terrible, Dick."

It was very strange, to be sure. Clara could easily perceive that she was in some way the cause of the old man's agitation; but why he was so deeply moved she could not guess.

Perhaps he was sorry for her, and would befriend and protect her.

Impulsively she reached out her hands and appealed to him for sympathy.

"For the sake of God in heaven," she pleaded, "I pray you to help me and take me away from here! I have been torn from my home, and brought here against my will, and it will break my poor father's heart, and what will become of me? Oh, my God! what will become of me?"

The old man had started back a little when she began her impassioned appeal, and he stood looking at her strangely, glancing in a vacillating way from her fair face to the disfigured countenance of Blue Dick.

She was almost sure that there were tears in his eyes, and she made another effort to move him to mercy.

"You asked if I were Adam Wynne's daughter, and I am. Oh, sir, if you ever knew my father, or have ever heard of him, you must know that he is a broken man, ruined by a villain, old before his time, and that my loss will kill him. For his sake, and for the sake of the dear God above us, be merciful to me, and let me go back to him!"

Blue Dick was heartless enough to laugh, and it seemed to Clara that his voice sounded like the grating of the key in the gate of death.

"I can't do anything," nervously answered the old man. "I would be glad to if I could; but I can't. This is Dick's business, and I never interfere with him, except to—to advise him."

"That's enough, old man," harshly interrupted Blue Dick. "I don't mean to have any foolishness about this. Come, girl, and I will show you a place to rest."

"I will not go with you!" shrieked Clara. "Is there no mercy here? Will no one help me and save me from this man? Don't dare to touch me, you villain!"

"This is a little too silly," replied Blue Dick, who had laid a heavy hand upon her shoulder, and who kept it there in spite of her. "All you've got to do is to be peaceable and obedient and nobody will hurt you. I am only going to show you a quiet place where you can rest and come to your senses, and if you don't go along willingly, you will be made to go—that's all!"

There was no help for it, and she was led away sobbing, through a narrow passage, and into a place some ten feet square, which was one of the numerous compartments with which the rock was honeycombed.

A dim light was burning on a shelf of rock, sufficient to show a pile of blankets on a rude sort of cot in a corner, which saved the place from the appearance of a wild beast's lair.

"I am going to do the fair thing by you," said Blue Dick, in a tone somewhat softer than he had yet used. "Just as I told you I would, I mean to be fair and true. I am going to make you my wife—that is as sure as that Satan smiles on his favorite son. There is no getting out of that, and the sooner you make up your mind to it the better. I don't mean you any harm, unless you call that harm. When you are my wife, you will get used to things, and we will settle down and take life easy. I am going to take away this light now, so as to give you a good chance to sleep. There is nothing to be afraid of, and nothing shall come nigh you. Good-night, and pleasant dreams!"

It was not in a mocking tone that he spoke his parting wish, though it seemed like a mockery to Clara.

She answered not a word, and he took the light and went away, and she stood there in the darkness as he left her.

CHAPTER XII.

"TWIXT THE CUP AND THE LIP."

BLUE DICK was silent as he walked back into the main apartment of the den of wolves, bearing the light.

Perhaps he was thinking of the change in his life that would be produced by his matrimonial alliance. Perhaps he was wondering whether he had employed the best, as well as the simplest way of winning a wife.

Whatever his thoughts may have been, there was nothing by which they could be guessed, as he set the light in a crevice, and placed himself opposite the old man, who was seated there in a brown study, if not in a sort of stupor, his head sunk upon his hand, and his eyes fixed on the rocky floor.

There was nobody present but those two, and

the old man started as if out of sleep when Blue Dick's voice broke the silence.

"Well, old man," said the head wolf, "I must say that you are a queer customer. The way you went on about that girl made me open my eyes. What does it all mean?"

"For God's sake, Dick!" broke in the old man.

"Oh, drop that! Don't call on strangers. The individual you are speaking of is no friend of yours or mine, and has good reason to be down on both of us. Talk of somebody you know."

"The devil take it, Dick!"

"That's more natural. Go on."

"In the devil's name, Dick, why couldn't you leave that girl alone, as I begged and implored you to do?"

"Because I had set my mind on her, and I meant to have her, as I told you, and when I determine to do a thing, I am always bound to do it."

"Anybody but that, Dick. Any girl on earth but that. There are plenty of girls. Anybody but his daughter."

"His daughter? Of course you mean Adam Wynne's daughter. Now, old man, I see that there is some sort of a story hanging to that—something that you haven't let me into yet. Give it to me now."

"But the girl, Dick—"

"The girl is all right. She is resting as well as she can rest here. I won't bother her, and of course nobody else will dare to. Go on with your yarn. I don't know when I have been so curious about anything."

"I will tell it you, Dick, though it is for me a tale of sorrow and remorse."

"Remorse? That's good. Now I am sure that I am going to hear something. Remorse! Never supposed that you had the faintest idea of what the word meant. Go on, old man, and get me onto the remorse business."

"You know, Dick, that in my younger days I was what is called a sporting man. I always played a gentlemanly game, though, and acted as a gentleman, and moved among gentlemen."

"One summer I was hanging around old Fort Leavenworth, getting on the right side of the officers there. It is a big thing when the right kind of a sporting man can get in with army officers, as they are fond of a quiet game, and usually play it for all it is worth."

"Adam Wynne was an officer of the army, with the rank of captain. The paymaster of the post had died suddenly, and Captain Wynne had been detailed to take care of the funds and perform the duties of paymaster. I suppose that made him a sort of major *pro tem.*, as he was called Major Wynne."

"It was then that I became acquainted with him by playing with him and some other officers at their quarters. The play didn't amount to much, and the army men won about as much as they lost; but I was looking out for something bigger, you see."

"One night, when I knew that he had a large amount in army funds on his person, I got him into my room, when I persuaded him to play with myself and one of my partners, and then I went for all he had."

"We had liquor, of course, and I dosed his drinks, and when he was far enough gone I laid him down to sleep, and took possession of his money."

"Then I skipped out, leaving a note for Major Wynne, saying that important business called me away, and that I hoped he would pay me the balance due me at his earliest convenience, for which purpose I gave him my address."

"Of course he was all torn up when he awoke and missed his money; but my partner, who was well paid to stay and fix things, told him that he had lost it at a game of poker with me, and that he owed me a few hundred dollars besides."

"The business was well managed, and there was no chance for him to deny it, as I was such a gentlemanly fellow, and so was my partner, and there was my letter to clinch what my friend told him. But you may believe that it was ruin to him, when I tell you that I had got away with nearly thirty thousand dollars in Government funds for which he was responsible."

"He wrote to the address I gave him, telling me the fix he was in, and begging me to help him out; but my answer was that it had been a fair game, that I had risked my money against his, that I had no reason to suppose that he was betting on what did not belong to him, and that I would expect him to pay me what he owed me."

"That was a good game," chuckled Blue Dick. "If he wanted to squeal, all you had to do was to let him squeal."

"I did just that. Well, Dick, Major Wynne was court-martialed, and dismissed from the army in disgrace, and perhaps you can guess how that sort of thing goes with such a man."

"He gave up every cent he had, though, and settled with the Government, and actually sent me the amount I claimed he owed me. But the disgrace and the trouble killed his wife, and he went away, as poor as Job's turkey, with his little girl, and was lost to everybody who had ever known him, except me."

"Where does the remorse come in, old man?" inquired Blue Dick.

"Where *don't* it come in? It is cropping out everywhere and all the time. What else do you suppose it was that forced me to keep track of him, in spite of myself? Nothing prospered with me after that, and I went from bad to worse until I brought up here in the hills, and—and—Dick, that girl is his daughter."

The old man bowed his head in his two hands, and appeared to be quite overcome by emotion.

Blue Dick stared at him a moment, and then burst into a roar of laughter.

"Satan snatch me, if this ain't too much!" he exclaimed. "You played your game well, and you won, and what difference does it make to you what became of the sucker? What difference does it make to you now what becomes of his girl?"

The old man looked up, and gazed piteously at the chief of the wolves.

"Don't take his daughter from him, Dick!" he pleaded. "She is all he has left in the world. Let her go free, and give her a chance to find her way home."

"I will do nothing of the kind. You are a fool to ask it. She is mine, and I mean to keep her."

"For pity's sake, Dick! For my sake, if you care for me at all! I am your father, you know."

"Yes, I suppose you are responsible for my being in the world, and small thanks to you for that. I tell you, old man, I mean to do the fair thing by the girl and marry her; but my wife she shall be, as sure as Satan lives! I have given her a chance to rest, and now I am going to stand guard at the pass for a while. All you've got to do is to mind your own business, and that is just what you will do, if you know what is healthy for you."

Blue Dick left the cavern, and was gone about an hour.

When he returned he saw the old man seated there as he had left him, with his face buried in his hands.

He looked up and groaned as his son came in.

Blue Dick bestowed upon him a smile of contempt, took the dim lamp that he had brought from the interior apartment, and went back there to look after his fair captive.

In a few minutes he came rushing back, his face red with rage, and his eyes nearly starting from their sockets.

The old man looked at him in amazement, and had to face a storm of wrath.

"Where is that girl?" demanded Blue Dick.

"The girl? Where you put her, I suppose. I don't know anything about her."

"You lie! She has gone—vamosed—slid out, and it is your doing. You infernal old villain, you have been playing a game on me though I warned you not to, and you will have to suffer for it. What have you done with her? Trot her out!"

"Why, Dick, I know nothing about her. Is she really gone? She can't have passed through here."

"She can't have gone through the pass, and she can't get out of the den by any way that I know of. Have you been nosing around and found out some secret way to send her off?"

"I tell you, Dick, I have not seen the girl since you brought her in here."

Blue Dick's answer was a brutal blow that stretched the old man on the rocky floor.

Then he seized him by the collar, and dragged him into the place where Cora had been left, kicking him as he dropped him there.

"Lie there, you precious old scoundrel, until I come for you! I am going to make a thorough search for that girl, and if I don't find her by daylight I will hang you, so help me Satan!"

CHAPTER XIII.

OUT OF THE FRYINGPAN, INTO THE FIRE.

CLARA WYNNE, shut up in the deepest and darkest hole of the den of the wolves, was left sobbing there by the captor; but she did not sob herself to sleep.

Though her case seemed to be hopeless, she felt that she must keep all her senses alert and lose no chances, and she had never been more wide awake than she was at that trying time.

She had hoped that the old man who took an interest in her might interfere to protect her; but this hope had died away when she perceived how completely he was held in subjection by the younger man.

It might be worth while to do something in the way of exploration, and she groped her way into the dark passage through which she had been brought.

Soon she saw a light ahead, and heard the sound of voices.

It would not do to go on. She would only bring severer troubles upon herself by provoking her enemies. So she turned back without stopping to listen to what was said, and again sat down in her dark corner and sobbed.

She could only wait and pray.

But a whisper struck her ear.

It was so unexpected and so close that it frightened her.

At first she thought it was the hiss of a snake, and she jumped up, nearly startled out of her wits.

Then she heard her name pronounced clearly.

"Miss Wynne! Clara Wynne!"

"Who is it?" she whispered.

"Your father's friend, Jake Nemo."

"Where did you come from? How did you get here?"

"Don't speak so loud. I have come to take you home. Give me your hand, and follow me."

She knew the voice then, and knew that she could trust him. He had come to take her to her father, and he would surely do it. The great joy that so quickly succeeded despair overcame her, and she nearly fainted, bravely as she had borne up when there seemed to be no hope for her.

But that was no time for fainting. She summoned back her strength, gave her hand in the darkness to Jake Nemo and suffered him to lead her away.

"You must stoop here," he said, when he had led her but a few steps. "Stoop and crawl after me."

She obeyed him willingly enough, and crawled forward into the hole, though its darkness and dampness and closeness were quite distressing. The dwarf encouraged her with his voice, assuring her that there was no danger, until they had penetrated the cliff a considerable distance.

Then he halted, and produced a small hand-lantern, which he lighted.

"You are all right now," he said. "You will find it unpleasant traveling in here, but perfectly safe, and all you have to do is to take this lantern and keep right on until you strike the open air."

"But what are you going to do?" inquired Clara.

"I am not through with those rascals yet, and I am going back to look after them a little."

"How did you know that I was here, and how did you get here?"

"Your black woman came over to the Poin-dexter Ranch and told us how you had been carried away. When I learned who had done the deed I knew where to look for you."

"But my father—why did he not come now? Had they harmed him?"

"No; he is all right, or will be when you get to him. Creep away, now. Go right ahead, and don't be afraid. You will find Harry Poindexter at the end of this hole."

The dwarf's last remark had an inspiring effect upon Clara, who turned and made the best time she could toward the end of the hole, the lantern lighting her way pretty fairly.

Jake Nemo returned along the black tunnel, seeming to be able to find his way in darkness about as well as in daylight, though it must be admitted that he could not have got off the track if he had wanted to.

It was when he neared the place from which he had taken Clara that his faculty of operating in the dark would have impressed itself upon the beholder, if any person had been there to see him.

He found fragments of rock, with which he built a barricade there, closing the tunnel so that no entrance would be visible when the work was finished. But he left for the present an opening sufficient to allow him to pass through, reserving two large stones to close it up when he should wish to do so.

Then he lay there and awaited the developments that must come when the disappearance of Clara should be discovered.

He had not long to wait. A faint light soon approached his hiding-place, and then the voice of Blue Dick burst upon his hearing pouring forth a torrent of rage and profanity.

The dwarf could not be mistaken in that voice. It had sunk into his memory when it sentenced him to death, and now he knew it instantly as it announced the loss of the fair prisoner.

"The old man has done this!" shouted Blue Dick, with another string of oaths. "He has run her off or hid her, though I warned him to leave her alone. I will settle with him, so help me Satan!"

Jake Nemo listened as the chief of the wolves dragged the old man forth and threw him down with a threat. Then he quickly completed the barricade, as a precaution against a search in that quarter.

The search was soon made.

Blue Dick and two of his gang came with lights, and of course he noticed the passage that led to the inner side of the cliff.

"What rat-hole is that?" he asked.

It was explained to him by one of the men who happened to have explored it.

"The old man may have stuffed her in there. If so, we will find her easy enough. Is there any other hole about here?"

"None that I know of."

A further search was made, but Jake Nemo's barricade stood the test.

"The old man is always nosing around," remarked Blue Dick; "but I doubt if he has found any hiding-places that we don't know about. You may crawl through that rat-hole, Sam, and we will go around and meet you. Then we will search the whole infernal business, and if we don't find that girl the old man will have to swing, sure as Satan lives!"

The men and the lights disappeared, and Jake

Nemo removed a portion of his barricade, as there seemed to be an opening for some more effective action on his part.

He crept into the den from which he had rescued Clara, and there he found the old man, who was awake then, and who at once became aware of his presence, as was proved by his agonized entreaties.

"Don't kill me, Dick! Don't kill your old father, my boy! As God is my judge, I don't know what has become of that girl."

"This is not Dick," answered the dwarf. "Dick has sworn to kill you unless he finds the girl, and he will not find her."

"Then he will hang me, sure as fate. Mercy on me, what shall I do?"

"Are you really afraid of him?"

"Deathly afraid of him now. I know he means to kill me. He has been working up to it for some time, and this gives him only too good an excuse. But perhaps he will find the girl."

"He will not find her. She is far from here by this time."

"Then I am a dead man."

"Not unless you want to be," replied the dwarf; "but your only chance to save your life is to get away from here."

"How can I get away?"

"Come with me. I got the girl out of here, and I am willing to take you to a place of safety."

"Who are you?"

"A man who is able and willing to save your life. But there is no time to lose. You can go or stay, just as you please."

"Oh, I can't stay. That would be sure death. I have long been wanting to get away from here. I will trust you and go with you, and will forever bless you for the chance."

The dwarf persuaded the old man to pass through the hole he had left in his barricade, and closed it up after him. Then he finally got him through the narrow and crooked hole in the rock to its entrance on the mountain-side.

It was daylight when this point of safety was reached; but there was no stopping to rest.

"Where are you going to take me to?" asked the old man, as Jake Nemo hurried him over the rough ground in an easterly direction.

"To the ranch of some friends of mine."

"Who are they?"

"Nobody you know. You will be safe there, and that is enough."

"Who are you? I think I have seen you before; but I can't remember."

"I am nobody of any consequence. We must hurry, old man. Blue Dick and his gang may come out through the pass and search about here."

There was joy at the Poindexter Ranch that morning. Clara had arrived with Harry, and her father had been speedily brought over, and nothing was needed but the assurance of Jake Nemo's safety.

While they were wondering why he had stayed behind in the den of the wolves, he presented himself before them with an unexpected guest.

This guest caused general surprise.

Clara Wynne recognized in him the old man who had been inclined to take her part. Her father recognized in him somebody else.

The recognition between the two old men was mutual, but not immediate.

After they had stared at each other a few seconds, Adam Wynne arose and stepped toward the other, his face flushed and his voice husky.

"Richard Grannis!" he exclaimed.

"I was right, then," muttered the dwarf.

"I was pretty sure I had found the man I wanted."

CHAPTER XIV.

"DEATH CAME TOO SOON."

KIT KENYON had determined to ride over to his stock farm, to look after his interests in that quarter and to get a few necessities and he set out directly after the rescue of Clara Wynne.

His destination was about forty miles from the Poindexter Ranch as the crow flies; but the route he would be obliged to travel would make it a two days' journey.

Near the close of the first day's journey he drew rein in front of a lone shanty in a very rough region.

It was a very poor excuse for a habitation, and there was little about it to show that the occupant had any visible means of subsistence. But Kit knew the shanty and its owner, and had reason to believe that he could procure there some food for himself and his horse and shelter for the night.

Near the shanty was a small corral in which there were three horses, and two of these looked familiar to Kit as he rode up.

Before hailing the house, he inspected the corral more closely, and was satisfied that he knew those two horses.

One of them was a bright bay with a white star on his forehead, and one white forefoot.

It was the horse that had been ridden by his wife on that fatal journey beyond the Notch, and his heart swelled as the beautiful animal reminded him so forcibly of his great loss.

The other was a tall black horse, that pricked up his ears at once when Kit spoke to him.

"Hi, Nero! What are you doing here, old boy?"

The horse "nickered" a recognition, and raised his head over the top rail of the corral.

There could be no doubt about the horses; but how did they happen to be there?

Was it possible that Jim Eno, the owner of the shanty, had been concerned in that murder and robbery at Cacheton?

Kit could not believe this. Though Jim Eno was a trifling fellow, and of little use in the world, he was harmless as well, and had never been suspected of any kind of misconduct.

But the horses were there, and how did they get there?

Until this question could be answered satisfactorily, it was well to be wary and suspicious.

Nero's noisy recognition of his master brought out Jim Eno himself. He was looking very slouchy and shabby, but his face lighted up at the sight of Kit.

"Hello, Cap Kenyon!" he joyfully exclaimed.

"You're a sight wu'th comin' out to look at.

Hope you find yourself hearty, gineral. 'Light down an' come in. I hain't had a squar' game o' kyards fur a month o' Sundays, and would be powerful glad to tackle you jest once."

"I thought that perhaps you had been playing a big game, and had won some horses," remarked Kit, watching him closely.

"Lookin' at them critturs, hey?" replied Eno, whose face was expressive of nothing but the most utter innocence. "They ain't my hosses. Wish they was. The ole mar' is mine, but she don't count 'longside the bay and the black."

"Where did you get the bay and the black?"

"A man left 'em byar awhile ago."

"When?"

"I disremember just when. I'm a powerful bad baud to keep the run o' time. But 'twan't long ago."

"What sort of a man?"

"A short, stumpy, red-headed Irishman. He said that I was to git pay fur keepin' 'em, and that he'd come back an' git 'em, and by jimminetti joskins! this is the very day he was to come arter 'em."

"That suits me," said Kit. "I will wait for the man, Jim, as those are my horses."

"Your hosses, Cap Kenyon? Then the red-headed galoot was a cussed hoss-thief."

"All of that, and something more. But I don't wan't you to tackle him, Jim. Leave him to me to attend to when he comes."

Kit Kenyon was then sure that he had got on the track of the murderers of his wife, and it was with serene thankfulness and cold-blooded satisfaction that he awaited the arrival of the man who was to come for the horses.

That man was signaled by Jim Eno just before dark, and Kenyon watched him through a chink in the cabin wall as he rode up.

He recognized the man at once. It was the same burly Irishman, known as Paddy Whack, whom he had seen in the Occidental Saloon at Homestretch with Blue Dick.

It sent a thrill through him to feel that he had been so close to at least one of the scoundrels, and had not known him.

But he would get him now, and would force him to confess his crime, and would be revenged in the name of justice.

Jim Eno stepped out and greeted the Irishman.

"Hev you come fur them hosses! Glad to see you. 'Light down an' come in."

But Paddy Whack was no fool. He had perceived indications about the premises that aroused his suspicions.

"Who is in there wid yez?" he demanded.

"Nobody," replied Eno.

But his face could not tell a lie, though he might force his tongue to utter one, and the Irishman was not deceived.

"It's a lie, ye thafe av the worruld! Phwat sort av a game are yez tryin' to play on me?"

Kenyon was forced to disclose himself, lest he should lose his expected prey.

His face was calm and almost smiling as he stepped outside, and his hands were crossed behind his back.

But one of his hands held a revolver.

"Get down and surrender!" was his quiet order.

At the sight of Kenyon, the Irishman jerked a pistol from his belt.

But Kit was not to be caught in that way.

He was as cool as an iceberg, and as solid as a mountain, fixed in his determination to settle the question before him most effectively.

He fired on the instant, and Paddy Whack's pistol hand was shattered.

Kenyon could neither afford to kill him nor to let him escape.

The Irishman yelled with pain, and dug his spurs into his horse, intent only upon getting away.

His effort was ineffectual. Kit leaped up and fastened upon him a grip that was sure to tear him from his seat.

The next moment his burly form came lumbering to the ground, with the tall avenger on top of him, and the frightened horse dashed away.

The result was extremely disappointing to Kenyon. In his fall Paddy Whack's head struck against a stone so forcibly that the life was knocked out of him temporarily, if not forever.

"I hope he is not dead," said Kit, as he anxiously examined the fallen man for signs of life.

"Reckon it wouldn't be much of a loss," replied Jim Eno.

"Help me to carry him in, Jim. If there is any life in him, I must get hold of it."

They carried the insensible Irishman inside, laid him on the best couch the shanty afforded, and eagerly endeavored to bring back the spark of life.

In this they were successful. After a while he opened his eyes, moaned, and was able to speak feebly; but he was in pain, and was evidently convinced that his end was near.

"Yes, you are going to die," said Kit, though he was by no means certain of that point. "If you want to go off easy, tell me about the murder of my wife at Cacheton, at night, when I was lying helpless there."

"Was it yer wife, thin?" answered Paddy, in a frightened whisper. "And was yez the dead man? How did yez iver find it out?"

"I know that my wife was killed by you and another man, and I want to know who the other man was."

"Fetch a praste, fur the love o' God, an' I'll tell it all afore I die."

"There is no chance to get a priest. But, if you confess your crime you will have a better chance in the next world. Make a clean breast of it, or you will have a hard time."

The Irishman begged for some liquor, which was given to him.

"So help me the howly Virgin an' all the saints," said he, "I niver had a bit av a hand in it at all. It was Blue Dick."

"Blue Dick?" replied Kenyon, who was not at all surprised at hearing that name. "How did he do it, and why?"

"He had been folleyin' yez, sor, beca'se he knowed yez had a pile of money, an' he sthruke yez at the played-out camp, thinkin' it w'd be an aisy job. He lift me outside to mind the hosses while he wint in to git the money. The lady showed fight, and he shot to scare her as

he tould me, sor, though I looked in an' saw her lyin' there as if she was dead. Thin he tuk the money an' the hosses, an' we lit out."

Kenyon gave the Irishman some whisky in response to his entreaties, and began to believe that he would recover from his hurt.

"Why did you leave the horses here?" asked Kit.

"Blue Dick got it intil his head, sor, that yez wasn't dead at all, an' w'u'd stbrike the thrail; so he made me ride up here an' I've the critters as a sort av a blind."

"Which one of you wore the buckskin coat?"

"Is it the coat, thin? Sure an' I wore it, sor, at Cacheton; but it was Dick's coat, an' he tuk it from me, an' throwed it away afore we got home. An' now, sor, for the love o' God, give me another sup o' the whisky, so's I ken die aisy."

"Don't talk about dying," replied Kit. "You are worth a dozen dead rascals yet, and will live to see yourself hanged."

"Is it hanged I'll be? An' phwat will yez bet on that?"

"Fifty dollars."

"Pay me now, sor—the money's as good as—ah-h!"

The death-rattle came in the Irishman's throat, his jaws dropped, and his open eyes were set.

The other knelt and examined him carefully.

"He is dead, sure enough," said Jim Eno.

"Death came too soon," sorrowfully remarked Kit Kenyon.

"Why do you say that, Cap?"

"He has had an easier death than he deserved."

CHAPTER XV.

A TRAP FOR A WOLF.

THE arrival at the Poindexter Ranch of Richard Grannis, Blue Dick's unrespected parent, caused quite a flutter among the people who were collected there.

It was doubtful whether it was to be regarded as a rescue or a capture.

As a matter of fact it had both of those aspects, depending upon the light in which it was viewed by the parties interested.

To Clara Wyune, who sympathized with the old scoundrel because of the peril in which he had been placed on her account, it had the appearance of a rescue.

Jake Nemo, who had been vainly endeavoring for several years to get hold of the old man, considered it a valuable capture.

Richard Grannis himself, who had escaped from the cruel clutches of his son only to fall into the power of the man he had so deeply injured, regarded it both as a rescue and as a capture, and was sorely worried by the predicament in which he found himself.

It was Clara who began to relieve his mind, by speaking of his conduct when she was brought into the den of the wolves, and thus giving him a chance to tell the story of his quarrel with his son on her account.

Having thus in a measure softened the minds of his judges, he proceeded to make that sort of a confession which is said to be good for the

soul, and told how he had stolen the large amount of money which Major Wynne was supposed to have lost at cards, thus bringing upon that gentleman the great disgrace and affliction of his life.

He declared his willingness to put his statement in proper form and verify it for the vindication of Adam Wynne, and then to give himself up to the authorities for such punishment as was due to his crime.

"This will be of some advantage to you, Clara, my dear," said Adam Wynne. "For your sake I will be glad to have my name cleared, so that we can hold up our heads again. It can never restore to me what I have lost; but a weight will be taken off my mind."

Jake Nemo was looking beyond the capture of Richard Grannis for other results to which it might lead, and he examined the old sinner closely, with the object of discovering what he might know concerning the murder and robbery at Cacheton.

But he proved to be quite ignorant of that affair, and there could be no doubt that his ignorance was not feigned.

If his son Dick was responsible for that deed, the old man said, he had carefully concealed it from his father; but there was nothing surprising in that. He believed that Dick had been flush lately, as he had heard of his spending money freely at Homestretch; but he did not know how he got it, and had not been told of any "strike" he had made.

The dwarf produced the scrap of paper that he had fished out of the buckskin coat.

"Is this your handwriting?" he asked.

"Why, yes," replied the old man.

"It seems to be the signature to a letter. When did you write that letter, and to whom did you write it?"

"It must have been written to Dick, of course, as I never write to anybody else. My last letter to him was written early in the winter, when he was down to Deadwood. Where did you get that piece of paper?"

"I found it. That is all I wanted to know, old man."

The news of the outrage at Adam Wynne's place had speedily become known at Homestretch.

Frank Burrick, the sheriff, who got his information direct from Sally, hastened to the Poindexter Ranch, hot with the desire of bringing Blue Dick to account.

Before he got there Kit Kenyon had arrived with his two horses, and had told the story of his encounter with one of the murderers of his wife.

This added fuel to the flame that was burning in the breast of Frank Burrick, who was eager to open the campaign against Blue Dick at once.

"It has been an open secret for some time," said he, "that Blue Dick and his gang were scoundrels of the largest caliber, though nothing could be fastened on them, and there was no fair excuse for interfering with them. But now there is proof enough, and I am just aching to get at them. We must hang the leader at least, and drive the rest of them out of the country."

"Very well; but how do you propose to get at them?" coldly replied the dwarf.

"Why you told me that you had found a way to sneak into the heart of their den!"

"Yes, but I doubt if it would serve the purpose of an attack. Only one man could sneak in there at a time, and if the head of the column should be caught it would be a very serious business all around."

"I propose to chance it anyhow," said Kit Kenyon.

"Don't be too sudden, Kit. I am as keen for this hunt as you are; but there is more than one way to kill a cat. I think we could make a bit of strategy work, but am afraid it might worry our friends, the Poindexter boys."

"Worry us?" exclaimed Arthur Poindexter. "I can't imagine anything you could do that would worry us, if it gave a fair promise of success. You can use us and all we have, to any extent you see fit."

"What is your idea?" inquired the sheriff.

"Simple enough. I suppose there is no doubt that the blue-faced scoundrel is a man who won't be likely to drop a thing that he has made up his mind to do. He has set his mind—if not his heart—on our friend Wynne's daughter, and we must give him a chance to get at her."

"What's that?" demanded Adam Wynne. "A chance to get at my daughter? There has been too much of that already."

"I think we can stand a little more for the sake of the cause. We must let him know that Miss Wynne and her father are here, and I am keen to bet that as soon as he gets hold of that fact he will come after them. It will be much cheaper, you perceive, to draw him out of his hole, than to try to get in there and tackle him."

"How shall we give him that information?" inquired the sheriff.

"Make no secret of it in Homestretch, and it will be sure to get to him quick enough."

"That's so, and we will be ready here to give him a warm reception when he comes. The only objection to the plan is that the ranch may suffer in the scrimmage."

Arthur and Harry Poindexter declared their willingness to run the risk of the ranch, and it was agreed that the enemy should be drawn out if possible.

The game worked pretty closely up to the idea that Jake Nemo entertained of it.

Blue Dick searched all the secret recesses of the den of the wolves until daylight, without finding the slightest trace of Clara Wynne.

Every possible hiding-place that he found empty increased his wrath, and his final failure drove him frantic.

The girl had either crawled out through the hole of which he knew, and had fallen or thrown herself from the edge of the inner chasm, or his father was responsible for her disappearance.

He was sure that the old man was the guilty party, and he hurried to the place where he had left him, determined to extort the truth from him or visit upon him the severest punishment.

The old man had disappeared.

He was not in the hole where he had been thrown down, nor in any part of the extensive

den with which Blue Dick or any of his gang were familiar.

His disappearance was as mysterious and as utter as that of the girl had been.

"I might have known it!" exclaimed Blue Dick, with a volley of curses. "There is some secret way out, or some secret hiding-place, and he has sneaked that girl off, and then has sneaked off after her. I might have known it; but I did not really believe that he had got away with her. Now I know it, and I wish I had strangled him when I had my hands on him. To think that the old sinner should turn out to be a sentimental fool at his time of life! May Satan scorch him forever and ever!"

A more thorough and careful search was made of the den in the hollows of the cliff, and of the entire stronghold, but no secret outlet was found, nor was any further hiding-place discovered.

"She is here somewhere," said Blue Dick. "Both of them are here somewhere. They can't have got away. They will have to show up or starve. Oh, when I get my clutches on that old villain again, strangling will be too good for him."

There was an abundance of whisky in the den, and to that Blue Dick resorted for consolation. If he could not drown his wrath, he might at least stupefy it to some extent.

The more he drank the more frantic he became, and he was consumed by a desire to do something to accomplish the one great object of his life and to prove that he could not be so easily beaten.

But what could he do? He had done what he had hitherto carefully refrained from doing—set the people of Homestretch and the surrounding country against him, and given the hounds of the law good cause to open on his track.

He could not doubt that his rash deed would turn them all loose upon him, and that it would not be healthy for him to go to Homestretch. In the den he was safe, as there he could defy attack, but it would be well not to venture abroad for a while.

Some of his men, as well as his allies outside of the den, were not restrained by such considerations, and those who were not known to be connected with the gang were free to go and come as they pleased.

One of them came in from Homestretch before long with news of the excitement that prevailed there concerning the abduction of Clara Wynne.

Blue Dick listened to this with a fair degree of equanimity.

"Did it seem as if they felt like making a fuss about it?" he asked.

"You may bet your dear life it did," replied his informant. "For a while they had it hot and heavy, and you would have thought they meant to raise an army; but they kinder quieted down when the news came that the girl had got clear. How did she ever get out of this den? That is what beats me."

"It beats me, too," said Blue Dick. "It beats all of us. How did you learn that she had got away?"

"Everybody in Homestretch knew it. Every-

body knew that she was safe at Poindexter's ranch.

"Those cursed Yankees! I've already got a bone to pick with them. They squatted on land that I meant for myself. But they can't have had anything to do with getting her away.

"The queerest thing about it was that the old man should be there, too."

"What?" exclaimed Blue Dick, starting up, and fairly boiling over with wrath.

"Oh, that's all solid, Dick. The old man is there, and thick as three in a bed with Adam Wynne and the rest of them."

Blue Dick poured out a perfect storm of oaths, and poured in cup after cup of whisky, before he could settle down to plain speech.

"Get ready, boys!" he shouted. "Blue Dick is on the war-path now! We will give those geese of Homestretch something to gabble about. I am going after that girl and the old man, and may Satan shake the soul out of me if I don't get them!"

CHAPTER XVI.

SPRINGING THE TRAP.

FRANK BURRICK entered into the scheme for the capture of Blue Dick with all his heart and soul, and it was easy enough for him to find adherents in and about Homestretch who were glad to "take a hand."

That part of the business, however, was conducted very quietly and secretly. The number of men to be "let in" was limited to as many as it was supposed would be sufficient for the purpose, and no others were given an inkling of what was intended.

The Homestretch contingent, having been pledged strictly to secrecy, made their way to the Poindexter Ranch singly and in couples, and were concealed about the place so that they made scarcely any show. In fact, the greatest pains were taken to keep the business of the ranch going as usual, so that everything about it should present its customary appearance.

When old man Grannis was made aware of what was in contemplation, he was thrown into a terrible fright.

He had a mortal fear of his son, and was convinced that Blue Dick could easily capture the ranch and overcome his enemies, and what would then be the fate of that old sinner, Richard Grannis?

He begged piteously that he might be carried away, and shut up in jail, or taken to Homestretch, or allowed to run off and hide, anything but remain and await the vengeance of Blue Dick.

"You are all right, old man," replied Jake Nemo. "We will see you through. That young lady is in the same box, and do you think we would allow a hair of her head to be touched? She is bait for the wolf, and so are you, and we must keep you both here; but you sha'n't be hurt."

Adam Wynne, on the contrary, was fired with his old martial ardor, and seemed to have grown several years younger as he put his rifle in order, and gave advice for the defense of the ranch.

It was an easy place to defend in respect of

the fact that it was not commanded by any neighboring elevation, but difficult because of the timber that surrounded it.

The house was a low, square building of rough plank, with no outbuildings except a couple of cattle-shelters a little distance at the north and the south. The timber was not thick, but the scattered trees were large, forming good shelter for an attacking party.

Of course it would not do to make any fortifications outside, as that would disclose the nature of the game, and "surely in vain the net is spread in the sight of any bird." Whenever any stranger approached the ranch the guards were concealed, as the stranger might be a spy. Not that it was believed that Blue Dick would waste any time in that way, but it was thought proper to use all reasonable precautions.

Blue Dick did not waste any time.

He not only struck sooner than he was expected to, but struck in an unexpected way.

In spite of all the care and precaution—in spite of Jake Nemo's sharpness and Adam Wynne's military experience, his attack was a surprise.

At the "deadest" hour of a very dark night the sentries were startled by the blazing of the two cattle-shelters, both of which burst into flames at the same time.

The garrison had hardly been aroused when the enemy came upon them, and those who had been sleeping found themselves in the thick of a fight before they could get their eyes open.

Blue Dick's men had battered in the doors and the windows, and had got a foothold inside of the house before their opponents fairly knew what they were about.

Then there was a hand-to-hand struggle that was as hot as any of those present cared to be mixed up in.

Then the discipline of the sheriff's men, and the central position they occupied, saved them from being overwhelmed and wiped out.

They stood up to their work in splendid style, provoking the admiration of their opponents, who were as much surprised at being met by so strong and well-organized a force as the others had been by the sudden and impetuous attack.

The house was divided into two rooms, in one of which were Clara Wynne and old man Grannis.

Into this room Blue Dick burst at the very beginning of the attack upon the house.

The sight of the girl and his father inflamed his wrath and more than justified his suspicions of the old man.

"You cursed old traitor!" he shouted. "I've got you now."

The old man instinctively threw up his hands with a yell, tumbled off his chair, and would have crawled under the bed if he had not been stopped by a bullet from his son's revolver.

Clara Wynne screamed at the top of her voice, and the chief of the wolves immediately turned his attention to her.

But her father stood in his way with a leveled rifle.

The old soldier pulled the trigger, and—the rifle missed fire.

Blue Dick seized him, and dashed him violently upon the floor.

Clara, overcome by the horror of the scene, fell down in a swoon.

Harry Poindexter ran in through the door that led into the other room, and fired as he came. His shot disabled the right arm of Blue Dick, who turned to face his new antagonist, drawing a pistol from his belt with his left hand.

Before he could raise it that hand was shattered, and not by a random shot, but by the sure aim of Kit Kenyon, who had closely followed his young friend.

"Leave him to me, Harry!" shouted Kit. "He is the man who murdered my wife."

As quick as thought Blue Dick turned, and darted out through the opening at which he had entered, followed by shot after shot from his two foes.

They pursued him; but he had vanished in the darkness, and the bullets of his friends outside compelled them to abandon the search.

They hastened back into the house, where they discovered that all their exertions were needed by Frank Burrick and his party, who had driven out their enemies, and had in their turn become the assailants.

It was not enough to repulse the attack; Blue Dick and his men must be thoroughly whipped, and if possible captured.

This was no light undertaking, as the wolves had the advantage of the cover of the trees, and their antagonists could not show themselves outside of the house without being exposed to a deadly fire.

When daylight came they might hope to do better; but such a flank movement as might then be successfully made could not be safely attempted in the darkness.

From their dilemma they were quickly relieved by their adversaries, whose fire became slower and fainter, and finally ceased altogether—a circumstance which was explained when Kit Kenyon got a chance to tell of the wounding and discomfiture of Blue Dick.

"They have run away!" shouted the sheriff. "Let's follow them, boys, and hunt them to their holes!"

It was at once agreed that this was the thing to do, and the men hastily prepared to start.

"I would be glad to go with you, Mr. Burrick," said Harry Poindexter; "but somebody ought to stay here and take care of Miss Wynne."

"And you ought to be the somebody, of course. But we will need you, my boy, as you know the way so well."

"Don't one of you stop for my daughter!" ordered Adam Wynne. "She is all right now, and I can take care of her. The best way to keep those scoundrels from coming back here is to follow them up and whip them."

"That's so," replied the sheriff. "Are you ready, boys? Where is—where's Nemo?"

Nobody knows. Nobody remembered to have seen the dwarf since Blue Dick's gang were driven from the house, and two other men were missing.

"Can they have run out and got themselves gobbled up?" wondered the sheriff.

"It's all right!" exclaimed Kit Kenyon. "I know what it means. I can guess that without

half trying. We have got those scoundrels now where we want them. Come on, my friends! We are losing too much time here."

They hurried off, Harry Poindexter leading them by as direct a route as possible to the gap in the cliff that led to the den of the wolves, and they reached it just as day was breaking.

Though they made good time, they knew that they were some distance at the heels of the fugitives, and they were surprised, when they broke through the piece of timber beyond the stony plateau that had been mentioned, to see the wolves huddled together at the base of the cliff.

"What's the matter?" demanded the sheriff, as he halted his party. "What keeps them there? Why don't they go in?"

"They can't get in," answered Kenyon.

"Can't get in? What do you mean?"

"Jake Nemo has the key!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE END OF THE VENDETTA.

KIT KENYON had rightly conjectured the object of his friend, the dwarf.

Not doubting that the wolves would be repulsed and driven back to their den, Jake Nemo had determined to do what he could to make the destruction of the band complete.

As soon as the tide of attack turned he slipped out of the house with two men whom he had selected for his purpose.

In this he was aided by the dense darkness.

In spite of the darkness he kept as straight a course to his destination as the region would allow, and pressed forward so rapidly that his companions, who believed that he could see in the dark like a wild-cat, found it difficult to keep up with him.

He went to the hole in the cliff as if he had a compass to guide him, and when he reached it dived in at once, telling the others to hurry after him; but he soon left them behind in the crawl through the narrow and difficult tunnel.

The few minutes that he required to tear down his barricade enabled them to catch up, and then he led them into the main apartment of the cavern, where a dim light was burning, but no person was there.

The dwarf had been blindfolded when he was inside of the den before, but when he got out into the open he knew where he was, as he had made a careful examination of that locality on the occasion of his compulsory visit.

So he led his companions silently and swiftly toward the gap where he had been captured.

Soon they were greeted with a hail:

"Who goes there? Who are you?"

Signs of coming day were beginning to be visible in the sky overhead, though it was still dark enough at the base of the cliff.

But two men could be seen standing near the inner end of the gap.

"All right," replied the dwarf, as he boldly advanced toward them. "Who do you suppose we are?"

"We thought everybody had gone."

"But we have just come back."

"How the deuce did you git in?"

"Oh, that's a new trick. The rest of 'em will be here right away. Go through and look out."

The guards were suspicious, and hesitated; but the three strangers were there within reach of them.

The dwarf jumped upon one of them, tripping him so that he fell, and his companions seized the other.

As soon as both were securely bound, the dwarf led the way into the gap.

He had accomplished his purpose none too soon. Day was breaking, and the voices of the returning pack of wolves could be plainly heard. He fell back and awaited their coming.

As they pressed into the gap in single file, two reports and flashes more than startled them.

The first man fell dead in his tracks, and the second was knocked over. The others stampeded to the open.

Their consternation was equaled only by their wrath. What had happened? Had their own comrades turned against them, or had the enemy effected an entrance into their stronghold?

Neither of these events seemed to be possible; yet they were fired upon and barred out of their den.

Blue Dick was in a pitiable condition. A bullet had passed through his right arm, and his left hand was shattered. The arm had been bound up; but he could not fight, and was thrown off his balance as badly as the others.

So they huddled together at the mouth of the gap, astounded and panic-stricken.

Then it was that their pursuers from the Poindexter Ranch burst upon them.

"Shoot them down!" shouted Kit Kenyon. "Shoot down every one of them but that cursed villain, Blue Dick!"

It was not a fight that followed, but a massacre and a stampede.

The wolves were so completely demoralized by the discovery that they were shut out from their stronghold, as well as the helplessness of their leader, that they were quite unfitted for fighting, and their adversaries had it all their own way.

Some of them scampered off along the base of the cliff, and others—especially those who were wounded—threw up their hands and surrendered, and there was an end of Blue Dick's band.

The chief of the wolves, unable to fight, and half-crazed by pain, dashed desperately into the gap, and was caught and secured by Jake Nemo and his companions.

"Here he is!" shouted the dwarf, as Kit Kenyon and the others hurried through the gap to join him. "What shall we do with him, Kit?"

"Hang him, of course."

"Correct. You have the right to say. Nobody will object to it, and the sheriff is here to oversee the ceremony. Come on, boys! I know where to find their hanging-tree."

The chief of the wolves was dragged up to the tree that stretched an ominous arm over the chasm, and was halted there.

It was then broad daylight, and he could plainly see the faces of his executioners; but he found no sign of mercy there.

Kit Kenyon and Jake Nemo, the dwarf, were among them.

"Here is the rope that he hung me with," said the dwarf. "I have kept it for him."

He unwound from his waist the rope that he had saved, and its noose was fitted to the neck of Blue Dick, and the other end was made fast to the outreaching limb, slack enough being left for a drop.

Frank Burrick attended to this part of the business as if he relished the job.

"Are you sure that you know what you are doing?" demanded Blue Dick with an oath.

"Of course we do," replied Kenyon. "You murdered my wife at Cacheton."

"Can you prove that?"

"Yes. I have the confession of your accomplice, the Irishman who was with you."

"Well, I am glad I got even with that old scoundrel who stole the girl from me."

"You deserve to be hung again for killing your father," said the dwarf. "But before you go off I wish you would tell me why you wanted to hang me."

"I've no objection. I knew that you were on my trail because of that Cacheton business. There were others here who hated you, too. That's enough, now. Go on with your funeral."

"Have you no word for anybody—no prayer?"

Blue Dick answered with a storm of oaths, which were cut short by a shove over the chasm, and the curtain fell upon the last act of the desperado's drama.

Richard Grannis had not been killed by his son's shot, but mortally wounded, and Adam Wynne did all that could be done for his succor and comfort.

"I wish I could get back into that den in the rock before I die," he said. "I've got a pile of money hid there—as much as the sum I stole from you. Of course it would not pay you for what you have lost; but I could die easier if I knew you had it."

Adam Wynne reported this to his friends when they returned to the ranch, and the old man was placed on a litter and carefully carried to the cavern. He died there, but was able before his death to disclose the hiding-place of his treasure.

Adam Wynne's reputation was cleared officially, and as far as possible it was cleared publicly; but he did not care to leave the region where he had found a refuge, and chose to settle on a ranch with Harry Poindexter, whom he readily agreed to accept as the husband of his daughter.

Considerable "plunder" was found in the den of the wolves, and it was agreed that it ought to belong to Kit Kenyon; but he would have nothing to do with it.

The murderers of his wife had paid the penalty of their crime, and that ended the matter.

Frank Burrick was regarded as having been such a success as sheriff, that his constituents called to him to "come up higher."

As for Dwarf Jake, he had served his friend, and that satisfied him.

THE END.

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